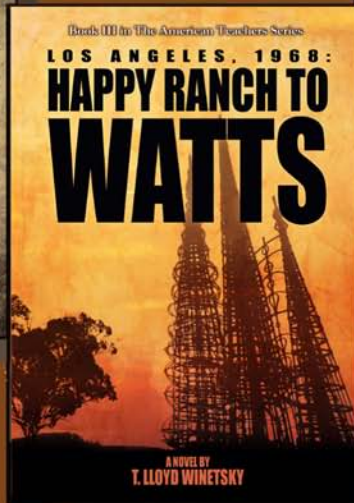
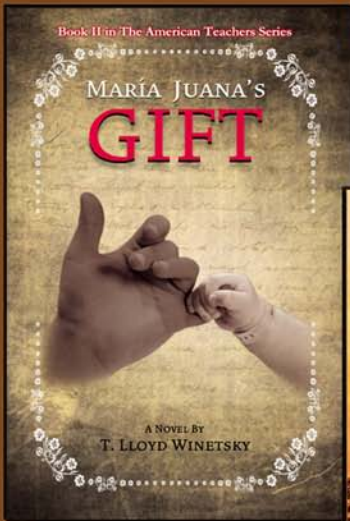


The American Teachers Series



by T. Lloyd Winetsky

Book I in The American Teachers Series

35
YEARS

MT. ST. HELENS ERUPTION
MAY 18, 1980

grey pine

T. LLOYD WINETSKY

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One dollar from each sale of this book reported to the author will be donated to *La Casa Hogar*, a non-profit advocacy and educational agency for farmworker families in Yakima, Washington.

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GREY PINE

BOOK 1 OF THE AMERICAN TEACHERS SERIES

T. Lloyd Winetsky

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Pen-L Publishing
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While the setting of *Grey Pine* is based on the actual event of the 1980 ash fall from Mt. St. Helens, the characters are fictional, and any similarity to actual persons is coincidental.

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To Sol and Mary, who had everything
and nothing to do with this story.

~



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Acknowledgments

Chapter Twenty-five uses a few words similar to some terminology in *Feeling Good*, by Doctor David Burns (Morrow/Signet). I submitted this chapter a few years ago to Doctor Burns for his comments or concerns. The vague terms did not require permission; he only wished me good luck with the novel. More importantly, Doctor Burns has given inspiration to untold thousands of people, myself included. Instead of easy answers from dogma or drugs, Doctor Burns offers intellectual tools we can use by ourselves, if we so choose. He helps us look at our own decisions, not to cast guilt, but to see if at some point we stopped telling ourselves the truth.

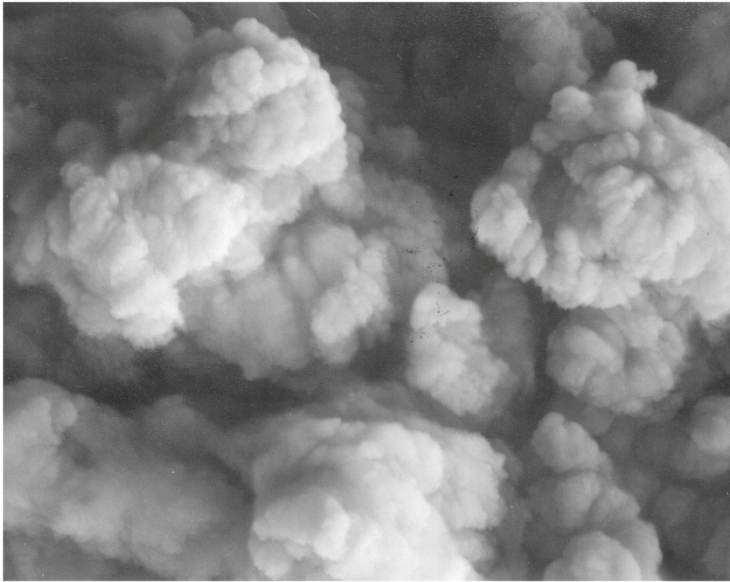
My thanks to Victor West, who very professionally critiqued and edited *Grey Pine*, and to Tom Clayton, for introducing me to the work of David Burns. Kudos to the staff of Mill City Press for patience in dealing with the novel's "interior monologue." I will always appreciate five real teachers who encouraged me to write: Cliff Claycombe, Julia Wheaton, Lydia Broyles, Nancy Hansen-Krening, and most of all, Kathleen Ruth Nelson.

This third edition of *Grey Pine* is now the first book in a series called *American Teachers*, from Pen-L Publishing. Duke Pennell, the publisher, suggested the series, and I am very grateful for his creativity and support.

TLW

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Part One

*... And there, there overhead, there, there, hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the canceled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all.*

– Archibald MacLeish
The End of the World

1

The seventy-year-old cab driver had taken a liking to his steady new customer; it didn't matter that Phillip was forty years his junior and seriously ill. On their return trip from a clinic in the city, Freddy was trying to make the ride comfortable. After he passed the small town of Ponderosa, he maintained his slow speed, wisps of volcanic ash eddying behind the cab's tires.

"Could you step on it, please?" Phillip said to the back of Freddy's grey head. "I need to get home." *To my carpet.* The taxi accelerated past alfalfa fields recently baled only the second time that unusual summer. The last mile seemed endless to Phillip as he tried to hold off the chill in his head by focusing on the diamond shapes woven into the seat covers. *No good, it's worse.*

Freddy hacked out a smoker's cough and turned into the rural housing development where Phillip lived. "Your appointment go okay?" he asked, his bloodshot green eyes checking his fair-haired passenger through the rearview mirror.

"What?" Phillip asked, annoyed by the interruption. He had one hand over his eyes. "Maybe you'd be better off if you didn't worry about me." *Crap, stop barking at him.* The taxi turned down Phillip's street and sped up to his garage.

Just get out. He climbed down and walked stiffly as if it were his leg, not his arm, in a cast. Every muscle in his slight frame seemed to ache.

“You need anything, call me,” Freddy offered from behind, but Phillip was already moving slowly toward the garage.

All I need is my damn carpet. He wanted to hurry, but the house seemed to be agonizingly distant. In his languid daze, he forced himself to make one step at a time through the garage and into the kitchen.

When he finally got to his bed, Phillip tried to rid himself of the chill for the third time that day. Over the tip of his nose he traced the carpet pattern below scores of times, then fell into an agitated slumber that brought him an encore of a familiar nightmare. He watched a white cougar attack his father while a distorted caricature of their next-door neighbor laughed at the slaughter and said, “Me and your ol’ man was peas in a pod.”

Shut up, prick. The images faded and Phillip opened his eyes, realizing right away the chill hadn’t completely subsided. *Get rid of it.* He sat up, stared at the carpet again, but found only slight relief. *Damn, now what?* Phillip staggered out of the room and tried his father’s door. It didn’t open; he dug into his jeans pockets with his good arm, but the sluggish efforts were fruitless until his third attempt. The keys hefted like iron, blurring together in his hands until he finally opened the door.

He approached his father’s bed. *Maybe here.* Phillip sat on the edge, leaned sideways and drew his index finger slowly along the pile labyrinth in the ash-dusty yellow chenille bedspread. *This has to work—down, around, to the right, out, and in . . .* On his knees and one elbow, he traced the thin pathway until the chill receded some. Phillip became drowsier with each loop and a murky vision of the neighbor materialized again. *Screw him; keep going—up, over, around, and in . . .* After several more seconds, his finger came to an obstruction, an old army revolver. *I shouldn’t have left this thing here.*

Phillip picked it up to get it out of the way, but he held on to the loaded weapon and stared at it. *I never shot one of these. Just pull the trigger, idiot. He’ll be out there sometime today, half-hammered, fooling around in his yard, nonchalant as hell. I wonder how cool he’d be if I—* The chill rallied at full strength; he put the firearm behind and returned to his course in the bedcover.

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. . . *up and over, around, and back again. Keep going—left and down again, back and around . . .* In a couple minutes, the track brought him back to the pistol. *There's an omen for you. Such BS, Phillip. No, no it isn't; find the prick.* He grabbed the gun and left the room. The chill was there, but somehow he moved more quickly than he had for hours.

On a pastel spring morning, months before he met the cab driver, Phillip watched pink and tangerine clouds retreat and scatter from the sun, dissipating in the powder-blue sky. Taking advantage of his father's absence, Phillip sought some serenity in their expansive backyard. This was his time to enjoy the day—the early quiet, the crisp air, and the shade from the house over their open patio. Most other residents of the Ponderosa vicinity would wait for church to end or for the chilling influence of the mountains to burn off so they could begin sun-worshipping activities later in the day.

In ragged jeans and a faded green flannel shirt, Phillip stretched back in an aluminum chaise, his wool slipper-socks resting well short of the end of the furniture. His new black and white Ponderosa Panthers baseball hat was tilted back, and a swatch of dark blond hair spilled over his forehead, tickling his fair eyebrows.

Phillip swept the strands to the side and settled in with the thick Sunday paper, a cup of hot cider, and two plain cake doughnuts. Under his chair, rock music from a transistor radio thumped away in a soft, regular beat. He wedged a pillow gingerly behind his weathered, slightly sunburned neck.

After reading the headlines then starting on the sports, Phillip heard squawking from one of the flowering bushes that lined their back fence on both sides of a crabapple tree. He looked up to see a fat robin perch precariously on a lilac branch, bending some lavender blossoms to the ground. Phillip returned to the sports but decided he'd read enough of another "Miracle of Lake Placid" story. He began an article about his favorite team, the Portland Trailblazers, and their chances of winning the NBA championship as they had three years before, in 1977.

Phillip lost his place moments later when an orange blur streaked by above the bill of his cap. Lifting his head too late to see the robin clearly, he noticed that the steady finches had abandoned his birdfeeder in the crabapple tree.

What's the deal? The cat must be around. He squinted at the tree and then reached over to a nearby chair for the bulk of the Sunday paper and plopped it onto the ground next to him. Recalling his father's decree to spray off the furniture and the patio, he brushed the chair's plastic straps with the ends of his fingers and then checked his hand.

It's hardly even dirty. So? He didn't want to anger Stephen and give him an excuse to cancel a doctor's appointment when he returned from the convention back in Chicago. Phillip had finally convinced him to have a mole on his neck checked and to get a physical while he was at it. Since he had failed for years to get his father to find help for his alcoholism, Phillip felt little compunction from a covert phone call he made to fill in the doctor on Stephen's addiction.

The chairs can wait till tomorrow. He finished one doughnut, sipped some cider, and then reached down for the front page. *Thank God there's only a month left.* He would only have to steel himself from Stephen until the end of the school year and the beginning of his summer plans.

Phillip was finishing his sixth year of teaching science, health, P.E., and coaching basketball at Ponderosa Junior High. The week after school was over he would be off for the mountains as a low-wage research assistant on a summer project to investigate the population and range of the Canada lynx in the Northwest.

The news about the research came before Thanksgiving just after another development, Phillip's new relationship with Guadalupe Rosendall. He couldn't decide which was more unlikely, being hired for the project or having a girlfriend like Lupe, whom he considered "out of his league" when they met. Taken together, his new girlfriend and the lynx research allowed him hope that the balance of events in his life had taken a positive turn, but his optimism struggled against an underlying

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dread that Stephen waited at some sort of imminent fulcrum with an anvil in each hand.

Phillip caught himself in thought, still reading the news but not processing the words. *He'll pull something for sure to avoid the doctor. You've got two more days; don't even think about him.* He let the paper drop to his lap, drank more cider, then put his head back again and tapped his calf to the beat of Neil Young's "Heart of Gold." Enjoying one of the song's harmonica riffs, he was surprised to see a bank of steel-grey clouds blotting the western sky. The music cut off on the radio and he sat up, expecting to hear low rumbling in the distance.

The weatherman's wrong—he said hot and dry. Good deal; bring on the rain. Phillip stood up to scrutinize the dark front. There was still no thunder; it was completely quiet for several seconds until one of the robins screeched and then a high-pitched voice began stuttering on the radio.



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“ . . . uh, we’re breaking in—yes, for some, uh, news—no, a news bulletin.” The young disc jockey, apparently trained only to deal with pre-recorded programming, continued to speak incoherently and seemed to doubt what he was reading. He finally got it across that Mount Saint Helens in the Cascades had a massive eruption and the ash was heading their way.

Phillip immediately rechecked the menacing clouds; they were already closer and darker, stitched with white heat lightning. *Good God, get the camera. Wait, who should know about this? Lupe—no, she’s in town.* Feeling like he had to share the startling news with someone, Phillip moved toward the house, his head turned back to the looming gunmetal-grey horizon as if it were chasing him.

2

The five thousand or so residents of the Ponderosa area had no medical specialists and no taxis, so, like Phillip, they sometimes found themselves with no choice but to hire a Four Rivers cab for a doctor's appointment in the city, forty miles away. Such inconvenience was anathema to a powerful faction who had pined for years for Ponderosa to become "a bustling small city." It drove them nuts that so many fellow citizens said things like, "This is a nice little farming town; folks around here would just as soon keep it that way."

Back in 1966, after the long-awaited arrival of their only fast food chain restaurant, the boosters' pride in the new chicken joint spurred them on to new projects, starting with a motto. Since the valley was located an hour's drive from a small skiing resort, the local chamber of commerce began promoting Ponderosa as "The Aspen of the Northwest." A few irked citizens pointed out that it was pathetic to pretend to be some other place.

Undaunted by the criticism, the chamber decided they needed an attraction that was somehow related to the trees for which "the growing city" was named, though most ponderosas had long ago been removed from the valley. The stalwart western pines were still ubiquitous in the nearby hills and riparian zones, and a few survived on the ridges of basalt escarpments east and west of town.

After greasing the wheels of progress, the boosters and investors began planning for The New Ponderosa Ranch to be constructed southeast of town on the road to Ski-Eden. More than a dozen people spoke against the project at a hearing before the Redfield County Planner, who, to no one's surprise, summarily decided the "Ranch" was approved.

Not long after that, two new signs went up at the city limits. One said, "OPEN NEXT SUMMER: THE NEW PONDEROSA RANCH - STATE RD 39 MILE 21," and the other, "WELCOME TO PONDEROSA - THE ASPEN OF THE NORTHWEST," the latter with a logo of a pointy Christmas tree that resembled neither a ponderosa nor an aspen.

So, scores of pines were removed and underbrush was cleared from the land. Without consulting the owner of the rights to the TV western, the developers created a mini-version of a cattle town and the famous family's spread, carefully avoiding use of the words, *Bonanza* or "Cartwright."

The mock homestead even had sculpted dummies of the TV characters with trumped-up but unmistakable names like "Horse," instead of "Hoss." False-fronted shops on Main Street hawked cowboy trinkets and apparel; you could buy "Pa's Mint Moonshine" ice cream at the Sarsaparilly Saloon, and there were other attractions like The Ol' Timey Arcade, Hop Wing's Restaurant, and The Cattle Drive Miniature Golf Course.

They advertised throughout the West, once on national TV, and every visiting vehicle was decorated with "SEE THE NEW PONDEROSA RANCH" bumper stickers. Most of the businesses ran only in the warmer months and by the second year they started going belly-up. The boosters couldn't fathom why the world didn't beat a path to the gates of *Bonanza* redux, and the grand scheme was abandoned. They kept Main Street as a ghost town and scaled back the enterprise to two active buildings: the Chinese restaurant and the Ponderosa Ranch Gift Shop and Museum—"ONLY ONE BUCK TO SEE 'PA' AND ALL THE OTHER DUMMIES UPSTAIRS."

The vicinity's only modern subdivision, predictably dubbed Ponderosa Estates, was to be the second jewel of local expansion. Two miles

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past city limits on the road to the ill-fated Ranch, the housing project covered most of an entire rural section and was divided into one-and-a-half-acre parcels—just enough room to convince prospective buyers that they would be in for some natural country living—but the elderberry, serviceberry, bitterbrush, bunch grass, sage, cottonwood, willow, and the coyotes, prairie dogs, porcupines, jackrabbits, falcons, meadowlarks, pheasants, quail, rattlesnakes and skunks soon gave way to the bulldozers.

At first there were only a few models—three-bedroom ramblers with sprawling lawns to blend in with a planned three-par golf course. The next homes sprung up one by one with unrolled turf, spindly foreign trees, and great slabs of pavement. That initial energy was followed by years of declining sales, and the subdivision stabilized with as many empty lots as homesites. Sage gradually reclaimed the unsold acres, cheat replaced bunch grass, and small critters and coyotes again made themselves at home.

Soon after the original “ranch homes” in Ponderosa Estates went on the market, Stephen Stark told his son that he’d asked for a transfer and they would be moving from Seattle, across the mountains to Ponderosa. Phillip was seventeen and reeling from his first experience with an immediate death—his mother’s—a few weeks before, but he didn’t complain about changing schools for his senior year. On a July weekend in 1968 they moved into one of the last models built in the development. Phillip soon found work in town at the market and on days off he sought refuge from his father’s worsening drinking habits by exploring the mountains.

As a child, Phillip Stark was Rockwell material for the Saturday Evening Post—thin and towheaded, with a mask of freckles beneath his azure eyes. By the time his senior year began, his face was free of maculation, his thick hair had darkened some, and he was in top shape from all the hiking.

He conformed enough to get along during his one year at Ponderosa High, but Phillip stuck mostly to his own interests and made few friends. His reasonably good looks and even some unexpected celebrity

in basketball couldn't save him from occasional ridicule. Phillip's main "offenses" were reading unassigned books about animals and bringing in his collections of natural specimens to Advanced Biology, his only "A" subject.

In the eleven-plus years after the Starks settled into Ponderosa Estates, the land for the doomed golf course gradually turned even wilder than the vacant lots, and the subdivision eventually became a patchwork of tract homes, a few two-story places and, most recently, some doublewide modulars. Some of the newer landowners ignored the development's covenants for tidiness, which angered Stephen, who frowned upon anything less than a fairway-perfect yard.

It was Stephen's immaculate lawn that made Phillip hesitate after he heard the frantic announcement about the eruption. Before heading for the neighbor's fence, he recalled one of Stephen's parting edicts: "Remember to walk around to your damn birdfeeder." He had planted a long strip of new grass to replace one of the garden beds.

"Screw it," Phillip said, separating two of the chest-high manicured arborvitae that surrounded the patio. As if crossing a creek, he long-jumped Stephen's precious seedlings and then turned back to discover that his heels had trampled a few lime-green blades of grass.

Too bad; they'll grow back. He rolled up his sleeves on the way to the fence then climbed up on a pile of old steppingstones his father put there to provide a boost over the planks. It always bothered Phillip that Mick Lewis, who was six-foot-four, could snoop into their yard any time he wanted. Like Stephen, Phillip was five-eight, and now his eyes, nose and mouth just cleared the top of the boards. He checked Mick's nearby patio and pool, then scanned the half acre of weedless lawn until he spotted him trimming around his garden shed, unclothed down to the waist.

Though Lewis was slender below the midline, his shoulders and arms were burly, and his beer belly protruded over the front of the baggy swim trunks he liked to wear night and day. His black body hair made his tanned skin seem even darker, and from a distance he could

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pass for a tall, portly aborigine. Phillip didn't know and didn't care what Mick looked like face to face; he avoided and despised him for starting up drunken binges with Stephen, who once told his son that Mick referred to Phillip as "Steve's fuckin' ol' lady."

Lewis turned off the trimmer, walked across the lawn to the patio and picked up a beer. His two-story colonial with the forty-foot pool was custom built a few years after the Starks moved in. Now in his mid-fifties like Stephen, Mick was divorced with no kids and could afford the home because he and his siblings inherited a local dairy, though Phillip was sure he made a negligible contribution to the business.

"Mister Lewis," Phillip called. *Mister?*

Mick took a swig from the can and looked at Phillip. "What do you want, kid?" Not caring if Phillip answered, Lewis put down the beer and glared at a black stinkbug drowning in the shimmering blue water.

Kid—shit. Well, you had to tell somebody; what did you expect? "Those clouds up there." He pointed over the wooden shingles on Mick's roof. "It's ash from the volcano."

Not even looking up, Lewis turned away. "It's a storm—see the damn lightning?" he said, reaching for a pool skimmer.

Asshole, suit yourself. Phillip jumped down and rushed to the house to retrieve a camera. On the way back out he stopped briefly to check the news on TV. They were showing the spewing volcano and talking mostly about mudflows and casualties, not the ash fall. By the time he came outside, the sky was still a brilliant spring blue to the east, but the oncoming iron-grey ash moved in from the west like a slow curtain of turbulent dry fog. He sat on the back step and hurriedly put on his shoes, watching the spectacle as he tied.

Phillip finished off the film with shots of the ominous slate clouds and the mute lightning, knowing the latter wouldn't turn out. He inserted his only spare cartridge and cursed himself for putting off the repair of his old thirty-five millimeter camera. Next door, Mick's lawn mower roared to life and then idled.

Idiot—screw him, it's almost here. This'll be incredible.

3

Violating Stephen's new grass more than once, Phillip moved around the big yard for some different angles and took another half-dozen shots of the billowing black and grey ash above. "Should save some of this for later," Phillip said to his camera and aimed it up again, but a few dark specks landed on the lens. He wiped the glass with his shirttail, forced the small camera into his back pocket then looked up and saw the charcoal clouds were losing their sharp definition, like a monochrome TV picture going out of focus. The creeping dusk had finally extinguished all the direct sunlight.

My God, this is it. He turned east again where the jet-black front was overtaking what was left of the sky, now a milky false dawn. He flattened his hand and held it out, the way you check for rain. His skin tingled from a fine shower of hard granules, and he brought his palm up for a look.

Man, it's like ground pepper. He walked back to the patio, turned up the radio and sat on the edge of a lawn chair. *Now what? Just watch for a while.* The disc jockey had been replaced but the news was similar to what he heard on TV, so he shut off the radio after a few minutes and just attended to what was happening.

Phillip extended his palm again until his arm fatigued and his skin turned sooty. He got up, brushed his hands, and then pushed his way through the cypress and onto the lawn. Turning back toward the house,

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he saw that only a strip of sky remained, the dusk thickening even more. He dispatched two last-chance photos of the midday dawn; then stood still and listened. *Mick's gone, no machines anywhere—nothing, not even birds; they must be fooled into sleeping.*

Phillip waited and watched for several more minutes, until the very last of the light was gone. Particles of ash tickled the hairs of his exposed wrist and he tried to inspect his skin but couldn't even see the outline of his arm.



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Head in, I guess. He smacked his baseball cap on his knee and brushed off his back and shoulders as he returned to the patio. After tripping over the chaise, Phillip pulled open the sliding glass door and tossed the three pieces of aluminum furniture into the dark den. He felt around for the radio and also found the doughnut and the cup before stepping up into the house. Phillip put everything on the floor, then

turned back to the yard and switched on the patio floodlight. Leaning out the doorway, he watched the flecks of ash fall like steady snow caught in a car's high beams.

Man, it's just amazing. Mesmerized, he stared into the ersatz storm until a troubling sensation surfaced into a clear thought. *This could screw the research.* Phillip glared at the ash and then turned off the patio light; it was pitch-dark inside and out. *God, not another damn summer with him.*

He slid the door shut, then stumbled in the blackout over the patio furniture. "Shit," he said, and swept his hand along the wall until it clicked the inside light switch. Phillip sat to remove his shoes, as was Stephen's rule, and saw the doughnut on the floor, powdered with dark-grey ash.

Yum. He noticed his grimy footprints on the carpet. *Vacuum that or he'll have a cow.*

Stephen kept the house spotless, including the large den they called "the poolroom." A full-sized billiard table and a pinball machine, both now rarely used, took up half the space. They kept a small desk cramped into a corner for the extension phone and one of Stephen's large glass ashtrays. Two of the pine-paneled walls were bare; the third was half-covered with a sheet-sized *yin* and *yang* South Korean flag Stephen brought back from the war.

Phillip climbed the two steps into the dining room, which deserved that name only in the sense that they usually ate there in front of the television. Like the den and hallways, the TV room had been matted on Stephen's orders with dark-green indoor-outdoor carpet to make things "easy to clean."

They each had their own recliner. Phillip's was an old brown Naugahyde with two positions, all the way up or all the way down. It used to be his father's, rejected years before in favor of a new model with motorized reclining, vibrator, and a drink holder/ashtray built into one arm. In a back corner next to a rack of metal TV trays, two folded up director's chairs waited for infrequent visitors. The single amenity in

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the room was Stephen's framed photo of Ingemar Johansson on the wall above the TV. Gloves held high in a pugnacious pose, the former heavyweight champion reigned over the sports, news and situation comedies that emitted from the RCA below.

Phillip walked over to the room's only window and lifted back one side of the thick curtains Stephen installed to keep sunlight off the TV screen. *Geez, it's like midnight outside, but no lights.* He let the curtain go, switched on the TV and backed up a few steps to his chair. Before he could sit all the way back, he was startled slightly when his cat materialized in front of him, its claws digging into Phillip's knees. Every inch of the feline was white as an albino rabbit, and its eyes, one blue and one gold, darted toward some enigmatic disturbance. The cat was the sole survivor of the menagerie of dogs, cats, rodents, rabbits and birds they had when Ellen Stark was still alive.

"What's wrong, boy?" he asked, stroking its short fur. The old rangy cat twitched its head, glanced at Phillip, then stood tentatively on his lap, tail bottle-brushed, reluctant to sit down. As quickly as it arrived, the cat jumped to the ground and disappeared through the pet door into the garage.

The darkness must be freaking him. Phillip returned his attention to the TV, but it was a national broadcast again. He got up and twisted the dial to check each channel. They all had special reports with news he'd heard repeatedly, so he left it on the last station. He sat down and reclined the chair to wait for some new information but was soon asleep, napping for most of an hour. He woke up to a news telecast from Four Rivers, the hub of the television market in their part of the state.

"... though there's no end in sight, the ash is just falling lightly in Four Rivers," the announcer said.

How could that be?

"... results of the ash analysis are not yet available; there is concern about the possibility of glass particles, so please stay indoors if possible, or find some sort of mask if you must go out."

Glass particles? I doubt it. How do you know, Phillip?

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“ . . . update you again at the hour on the ash fall. We return you now to network coverage of the eruption and . . . ”

Falling lightly, maybe it's not as bad as you thought. One way to find out—let's see, painting masks. Phillip rushed into the garage and moved in the dark easily since Stephen always kept everything in the same place. He came to the doorless portal to the shop and turned on the light.

Except for a line of ash near a door to the yard, the shop was immaculate; not a wood curl or bit of sawdust defiled the table saw, lathe or workbench. Phillip opened a painting drawer and found a half-dozen white particle masks, precisely stacked like the perfectly cut potato chips that come in a cylinder. He hung one of the crisp new masks on his neck then hurried back into the house and down to the den.

He switched on the patio light; the beam was completely clotted by the dry blizzard. *My God, total whiteout—greyout, I guess.* He removed his cap long enough to pinch the mask's aluminum strip over his nose and then snap the elastic band behind his head. Without sitting down he put on his shoes and tried to watch the falling ash at the same time.

Phillip went out, stopped, and felt particles whisk across his forehead like gnats. His trapped breath recirculated in the mask and he began to sweat around his mouth. He stepped off the single stair, bent over and scooped up a handful of soot.

“Man, at least an inch already,” he said, his voice muffled. Phillip stood up into the strong light, rubbing ash between his fingers. *It's softer now.* His shadow should have stretched across the yard, but it didn't even reach the end of the patio where it faded into the opaque air. The shrouded arborvitae resembled enormous licorice gumdrops, and the settling dust completely cloaked the lawn except for a few long blades of edge grass.

Stephen'll have a damn fit. His peripheral vision picked up some movement; he turned toward it. A mouse, grey as the ash, held still, as if aware of its camouflage. Amazed that the rodent stood its ground, Phillip stooped and leaned closer, within a couple of feet, before the

mouse scurried into the dark, leaving behind delicate forked footprints. Phillip squatted to check the tiny tracks, the only imperfections in the uniform layer that covered everything.

He let me get so close. He stared at the prints for several moments until they were obscured then erased by the unrelenting ash fall. Phillip stood and turned toward the floodlight to gauge how hard the ash was coming down. *It's not letting up at all.* He pulled the mask away a moment for some air.

Phillip sat on the step beneath the light and took off his cap. Earlier it was white with a black "P," but now he saw it was dark grey, the capital letter barely visible. He smacked the hat on the side of his leg and put it back on. From Mick's yard Phillip heard the report of a metal pole clanging on concrete.

"Goddamn it to hell," came sputtering out of the pall in an even, matter-of-fact tone.

Gee, Mick, what's wrong? He got up and brushed off his rear. *Crap, see if the jerk needs help.* Phillip walked a few feet onto the patio and turned back to the light to examine his footprints, each one so precisely molded it cast its own small shadow. *Man, so incredible. Yeah, if some of it went north, you're screwed. People are dead over there, Phillip, like you've got problems.*

Stepping backwards several more times, he watched his tracks and the floodlight fade into the pitch. He stopped, listening to the midday nightfall. *No noise at all on the block.*

A mumbled oath drifted in from behind: "Damn shit."

Except Mick. He turned around, stepping through the cypress into total darkness. As if blind, Phillip walked with his arms out until the bill of his cap finally bumped into a branch of the crabapple tree. After two more steps he made out the top of the fence; a dim horizon created by Mick's high-wattage patio lights. He felt around for the craggy steppingstones and climbed up.

"Son of a fuckin' bitch," Lewis said, cussing so blandly he could have been saying, *'Son of a gun.'* The strong floodlights exposed the flittering particles and Mick's silhouette, a stage performer surrounded

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by a fake storm. Less than twenty feet away from Phillip, he peered down at the detritus that was quietly descending into the deep end of his kidney-shaped pool.

The ever present can of beer in one hand, Mick folded his long legs into a squat and directed a flashlight into the surface of the water. “Fuckin’ mess,” he said, his voice muffled by the unseen cigarette Phillip knew was hanging from the side his mouth.

I warned you, idiot. “Need help with the cover?” Phillip called after lifting his mask.

Lewis continued to glare at the water. “You again? It’s too damn late, it’s floating to this end. Worst is over anyway.”

“Not what I heard.”

Mick stood and looked toward the fence, though Phillip was practically invisible. “And what did *you* hear, kid?”

Shit, it won’t matter what I say.

“Well?”

“They said no end in sight.”

“Bullshit; it’s slowing down.” He turned back to his pool and beamed the flashlight into the water again. “Tell your ol’ man to call me when he gets back.”

“Yeah.” *Like hell I will.* “It’s falling hard. You sure you don’t want to keep some of it out of there?”

“I’m sure, goddamn it.”

Screw it. Phillip started to turn around, but he stubbed his foot on a board.

“Why don’t you take off; mind your own fucking business,” Lewis said, emotionless.

As much as Phillip hated him, he was still struck by the remark. He said nothing, stepped down and sat on the concrete slabs, the fence blocking the light from the other side. *He can wipe his ass with the damn pool cover—be more useful that way.* Phillip stood up. *Tell him. Yeah, be just like him, like Stephen. They deserve each other.*

He started back into the dark toward the house. When he came into the faint light on the patio, Phillip discovered that the steadily

falling ash had already rounded off the molds of his initial footprints. *Worst is over, huh? Plastered ol' prick, I hope it fills your damn pool.*

At the back door, Phillip stopped to brush off the ash and shake his hat. He tapped each of his heels to dislodge the grime and then entered the den. After he closed the door and turned on the light, he pulled off the mask and removed his shoes again. As he walked through the den, Phillip noticed the pool table's snap-on black vinyl cover was dusted with fine grey powder.

It's in here already. He gazed back at the falling ash. *A lot more to see outside, not with frigging Mick in his yard. Maybe go out front. No, see if Lupe's back.* He picked up the poolroom extension and punched in the numbers for the long-distance call to her parents in Sageview. Phillip listened to the clicking pulse from Stephen's new touch-dial phones.

How is this crap better than dialing? After a few rings, he got a "circuits are busy" recording. *Call the apartment.* Phillip tried her number in Masonville, same result. *Try later—check the volcano news.*

In the TV room, he walked in on a live telecast from the west side of the mountains. A middle-aged reporter wearing brand new neon-orange outdoor gear was speaking from some small town upwind of the eruption. Over his shoulder they had a clear shot of Mount Saint Helens in the distance, continuing to release thick leaden clouds.

Daylight over there, dark over here—wild. The ash, the announcer said, was being carried to the northeast by the prevailing winds. *Crap—north-northeast or east-northeast?* When the man started discussing mudflows, Phillip sat in his chair and waited for different information. Several minutes later, the cat jumped back up on Phillip's lap, its claws dug slightly into his jeans again.

"Where've you been?" he asked, half expecting the animal to speak right up. "Easy," Phillip said as he petted. His sixteen-year-old cat finally sat all the way down, but his dissimilar eyes kept exploring all corners of the room.

He senses we're right down to it; the earth's running the show.

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“Ready to eat, Ali? Past your lunch time.” When Phillip was thirteen he found the white kitten scrounging in a dumpster not far from their old house and later named his pet for a tiger in a children’s book that Ellen Stark used to read to him.

On TV, two studio reporters were transposed over a different live shot of the volcano. The man was listing damage statistics but he stopped and yielded to the female announcer. “We’re getting some interesting reports now from the other side of the mountains,” she said, and then paused.

All right, about time.

“We’re told that the ash clouds in much of the central and eastern part of the state have turned day into night, and there’s heavy ash fall in many towns, and lesser but significant amounts in the cities of Guthrie and Four Rivers. At this point, there seems to be no letup, and the ash continues to . . .”

Hear that, Mick?

“ . . . few cars have been able to enter or leave a seven-county area since the ash started to come down. Travelers are stranded in schools and Red Cross shelters, and commercial airports are closed indefinitely. Health officials are asking the public to . . .”

The airport—God, Stephen will be stuck back there. Yeah, in seventh heaven, pickling himself in the hotel bar. Damned if he won’t miss his doctor’s appointment—you get to start all over.

The female reporter on TV accepted a hand-delivered note. “Bill, this just in: In at least these four counties: Redfield, Four Rivers, Chief Joseph and Guthrie, most government offices and schools are closed tomorrow and until further notice . . .”

You’re kidding. Easy, it’s probably just a couple days. “Well, we may as well get comfortable,” Phillip said, reclining the chair slowly so he wouldn’t disturb the cat. He returned his attention to the TV and stroked Ali, who began to knead lightly on Phillip’s legs.

“ . . . we’ve been so focused on the catastrophic destruction over here, and now these serious new complications are developing on the

other side of the state.”

“Yes, Diane, and I’m sure everyone over there has witnessed right along with us the heroic stories touching us all so deeply over the last few hours. Hopefully, that will help them a little as they deal with their own situation.”

“You’re so right. It’s truly amazing how a tragedy like this brings people together. The impersonality of modern life seems to disappear, and we’re neighbors again, neighbors helping neigh—”

“Well, Diane,” Phillip said to the TV, “over on this side we’re cleaning our swimming pools and minding our *own fucking business*.” Ali leaped to the floor, ducked through the cat door into the garage and didn’t return for the rest of the evening.

4

When Phillip and his older sister, Joann, were children in Seattle, Stephen was only a weekend drinker, smashed on Friday or Saturday night with his friends. The few times he drank at home, he was so irritable that the family would just try to ignore him until he fell asleep or passed out, and the next day it was forgotten or even joked about.

After Ellen Stark was hospitalized with lung cancer, Stephen started to drink on weekdays, and Phillip sometimes had to dry him out for hospital visits. After her death, Phillip thought it was understandable when the drinking worsened, but after a year or so he began thinking of his father as two different people: his “real” dad, and Stephen the drunkard. It eventually became so difficult to communicate that Phillip had to surreptitiously trap Stephen’s attention when he wasn’t having one of his crapulent hangovers.

One morning, several months before the volcano, Phillip shut off his alarm early, got some juice and waited in his bathrobe for Stephen in the kitchen. His father came in wearing navy-blue chino trousers and a white shirt with “STEVE” monogrammed on the pocket, the uniform for his job as a hardware stock supervisor in Four Rivers. He was “Steve” only at work and to Mick, as far as Phillip knew.

“Can we talk a minute?” Phillip asked, as if such a proposal was an

everyday occurrence, but Stephen just poured some coffee and sipped it. His face still tan from summer yard work, Stephen had just trimmed his modest sideburns and shaved. His Brillcreamed dark-brown hair, not a strand out of place, was parted on the left to form a straight scalp line. Besides their identical height, Stephen shared few physical attributes with Phillip, whose pyramid-shaped nose and blue eyes were in complete contrast to his father's flat pug and green irises.

"Dad, you pulled an all-time first the other night, you threw one of your big ashtrays at me." He chuckled as if it was funny.

"I think you're exaggerating, Phillip."

"Okay, let's say it was flung in my general direction. I've told you, you don't always remember what happens when you're drunk. Will you think again about talking to someone?" he asked, but Stephen just cringed, so Phillip continued. "If you get some help, who knows, you might end up seeing someone again. It's been over ten years."

Stephen surprised him by speaking right up, somber but direct. "It's *twelve* years, but that isn't your business. People don't have what your mother and I did," he said, looking away. "I don't want to see anyone else; that's just the way it is."

"Dad, you're still young, you—"

"Stop, Phillip, and don't bring it up again."

"All right, sorry, but the point is your drinking," he said, and Stephen put his cup down, turned away and walked to the garage.

Phillip tried to lighten the moment before Stephen got to the door. "Hey, I saw you working on your car the other day—running okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, just cleaning."

Scolding himself for being tactless, Phillip watched him go out. He knew the repercussion would be a binge when Stephen got home, probably leading to some kind of hassle between them.

Not long after that failed intervention, Stephen cornered his son on Halloween night after Phillip hung up the phone. He was in the habit of calling Lupe as if they lived next door, though her apartment

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was more than thirty miles away. Phillip rolled up the sleeves of his flannel shirt, took an unsatisfying sip of room-temperature beer and glared at some smoke that scudded up to the doorway. His disdain for cigarettes was intractable since his mother's cancer and because Stephen usually smoked when he drank. So he knew it was Stephen coming in, not his dad, who had returned sober that evening from work.

Stephen stepped down into the den, the cigarette, as always, burning toward his palm. "Just like Mick, the Marlboro Man," Phillip once told him and then added, "Do you realize how much smarter you are than that jerk?"

Another squabble ensued and Stephen got in the last words: "Between the goddamn Okies across the street and the nosy old fart next door, Mick's the only good neighbor I have—just keep your clever little mouth shut."

Now Stephen cradled a bowl of trick-or-treats in one arm; the other hand held the cigarette as well as one of his "tall boys," which, as always, was preceded by a shot of bourbon. He had been watching a *Gunsmoke* rerun between surly trips to the front door to satisfy the neighborhood goblins.

Stephen Stark's inebriation never compromised his neat attire; he was wearing pressed slacks, a fresh short-sleeve sport shirt and shiny loafers as he approached his son. Phillip was thinking that the dime-sized black mole below Stephen's ear looked like a hole in his neck, just right for Halloween.

Stephen put down the miniature chocolate bars on the desk. "Jesus, you were on the phone with her again?" he asked, snarling his nose and squinting his blood-shot eyes, a circus-mirror visage of his sober self.

"Yup, every night," Phillip said, turning away from the cigarette. "So why wasn't it a problem yesterday?" he asked, knowing full well Stephen wasn't drinking the night before.

"You weren't on there for two goddamn hours." He placed a coaster on the pinball machine, set his beer on top, and then intentionally left the ashtray and the burning cigarette next to Phillip, who moved it right over to the pool table.

"It was barely more than an hour." Phillip faced the door, already planning to get out of there.

"Bullshit." Though Stephen was riled, his eyes sagged.

"How would you know? You're already wasted."

"Wasted my ass. Don't talk to me like that."

"Fine, did you need the phone?" He pushed it toward him.

"No, that's not the damn point . . ."

Seeing that a lecture had begun, Phillip slumped down into the chair while Stephen leaned on the pool table and kept talking.

". . . and you should've got this kind of thing out of your system in high school."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Phillip asked, trying midsentence to mitigate his defensiveness.

"You're mooning around here with a stupid-ass teenage crush. How much younger is she?"

Phillip wondered how he knew that. He put his elbows on the desk and massaged his temples with the ends of his fingers and thumbs, staring silently at the trick-or-treats below.

"Well, how old is she?"

Phillip unwrapped a candy. "Almost twenty-three," he said, inserting the entire little bar into his mouth, still looking down.

"Friggin' cradle robber, I suppose you don't want to tell me her name, either." Stephen quaffed two gulps of beer.

"Why d'ya' ev'n care?" Phillip said, his words garbled by the candy.

"I don't, but tell me anyway. Look at me, goddamn it."

Phillip licked the last of the chocolate from his teeth, raised his head and resignedly pronounced her first name correctly, as Lupe preferred.

"Loopy?" Stephen said. "Jesus Christ, I didn't believe it."

"Believe what?"

"What a little turd told me in town. So she is a fu—"

"Stop, damn it," Phillip broke in. "Her name is Guadalupe Rosendall," he said, seething. "Her mother immigrated from Mexico. You happy now?"

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That sent Stephen into a roar of derisive laughter and a racial snit about Mexican farm workers. “. . . and I bet the ol’ lady probably sorts fruit at—”

“What if she did? She’s been here forty years, she’s a teacher, but you’ve got everybody pegged.” Phillip grabbed his half-full can of beer and got up again. “Damn Kurt,” he mumbled. He was sure that Kurt Raihofer, an ex-schoolmate in Ponderosa, was the “little turd” who gossiped to Stephen.

“Hold it, you’re not getting off that easy. Her ol’ man’s name is Rosenthal?”

“Rosendall.” Phillip stopped at the door to the TV room.

“Don’t tell me he’s a kike.”

He turned back to Stephen. “That’s your ignorant word.”

“I’ll be a son of a bitch; and I suppose he runs a bank?”

“He’s a commodities trader in Four Rivers.”

“Same damn thing.”

“Why don’t you stop? This is none of your business anyway.”

“Shit, leave it to you to find a half-kike, half-Mexican bead-snapper,” he said, picking up the treats.

“Right, she’s part Mexican, so she must be a Catholic. She’s a Methodist.”

“You can bet she was raised with Mary and the Pope. What a match—the bead-snapper and the pagan.”

“Yeah, at least I went to some of Mom’s big deals.”

“Bullshit.” Stephen wanted no mention of his wife. “Jesus, when the shit hits Loopy’s fan, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He wrapped a hand around the neck of his beer and held up the candy. “You take charge of this crap; I’m going over to Mick’s to watch the fight on the dish.”

Phillip was asleep in his recliner where he had watched volcano reports for hours, occasionally measuring the accumulation outside with a ruler. The last time he checked the ash it was more than two

inches deep, and coming down steadily. Local TV and radio information was still sketchy and uncertain; mainly they kept warning people to stay inside and not to drive except for real emergencies. Before he fell asleep, Phillip tried again to reach Lupe, but the circuits were still down.

Now he was attempting to turn on his side to get more comfortable in the chair, but a sharp pang grabbed his intestines. Phillip opened his eyes to jittery TV shadows on the ceiling. *Late show, I guess.* He looked down and saw it was the national network, their regular early morning program.

“What the hell?” he said. *It’s the smile-until-it-hurts-show.* As if on Phillip’s cue, the glib weatherman yielded to two grinning hosts who joked around in front of a backdrop of the smoking volcano. Phillip focused on the glow of the electric clock on the bar between the TV room and the dark kitchen.

Eight forty? God, sleep of the dead. He craned his head toward the kitchen window. *Still no daylight—unbelievable. How much ash? At least three inches, I bet.* He listened for a few seconds to the morning-show talking heads and realized they weren’t even discussing the eruption.

“Who shot J.R.?” Phillip asked, incredulous. He moved his line of sight down to the TV tray next to him. His neglected dinner from the previous night looked like it was staged for pop-art: a red apple with one missing bite turned putrid brown, an untouched candy bar, and a partially unwrapped and nibbled bean burrito; all of it on a soiled white paper plate. At the side, a full glass of cola had lost its carbonation.

Guess I wasn’t very hungry. Still bleary-eyed and stiff from sleeping in the chair, Phillip got up with the food. His gut still bothered him as he shuffled into the kitchen, turned on the lights and set the plate and soda by the sink.

Wonder if Ali’s back? He picked up his prescription from the counter then swallowed a pill with the flat cola and saw his movements reflected in the dark window. Diagnosed with a bleeding duodenal ulcer at fifteen, just months before his mother died, Phillip never told her about it, and Stephen just paid the medical deductibles without comment.

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Between his thumb and forefinger, Phillip pinched a stack of sandwich cookies from a package on the counter. He ate one in two bites, taking a closer look outside. There was no hint of morning light, and the dry ash-fog hid all the shapes normally visible at night.

Let's see, it was dark by noon. God, that's more than twenty hours. He glanced over at the TV and heard an announcer react with near titillation to his partner's sensational facts about the eruption. *Clowns—tell me about the ash fall.* He leaned over on the bar, ate part of another cookie and watched the program. They finally came up with a map that graphed the prevailing wind; the ash had been carried much more east than north.

It's nowhere near the project. All right! Phillip tossed the remaining piece of cookie in the air, caught it in his mouth and then made a quick trip down the hall to his bathroom. On the way back he saw a small, disemboweled creature and streaks of soot on the kitchen linoleum. *Ali's back.* During Phillip's brief absence the mouse was left for him on what had been Stephen's spick-and-span floor.

No more little prints in the ash for that rodent. Phillip found the dustpan, swept up the tiny carcass and some of the grime, and dumped it all in the trashcan. *Ashes to ashes.* Ali sauntered in through the flap in the garage door and stopped to sniff the spot where he dropped the mouse. Leaving that, he started making circle-eights around Phillip's legs, his purr rattling.

"Well, you're a changed man this morning. Thanks for the gross little gift," Phillip said and leaned over to pet him. Though Ali was neutered, he was a territorial prowler, gone sometimes for more than a day, the scourge of any unwary rodent or bird. A vacant lot north of the Starks was actually a finger of land from the defunct golf course, easy access for the cat to some relatively wild sage country.

As soon as the petting stopped, Ali went right back out; he would return around noon meowing for canned food, a schedule Phillip attributed to the cat's nightly hunting.

Ruler in hand, Phillip headed straight for the poolroom and the

sliding glass door. He flicked on the porch light and looked out. Like tiny scattering moths, just a few particles floated in the artificial light, but the beam still petered out in the haze at the end of the patio. *It's almost over.*

Phillip turned on the poolroom lights and looked down. "My God," he said out loud. The ash from outside was up against the glass, forming a nearly straight line across the door several inches above the ground. He cast the flimsy patio furniture out of his way and got down to his knees to check the depth; it measured just over five inches.

"My God," he repeated. *It must be even deeper away from the house.* He touched the glass to inspect the cross section of ash; it reminded him of the ant farms he used to make. The quarter of an inch nearest the bottom resembled minute black gravel, and the layers above changed from black into shades of grey like a test pattern on fifties TV.

Poor Mick—what a shame. Guess he'll have to dig it all out of there. He laughed out loud; then cause and effect dawned on him.

What do you think you'll be doing? He stood up to peer into the yard, agonizing between the good news about the path of the ash fall and the complication of having to deal with the profound mass of volcanic debris right in front of him.

Can't be all that bad. Phillip put his nose right on the glass and both hands around his eye sockets to cut the glare from behind. He could just make out that there were no demarcations between the patio and the arborvitae; everything buried under a level overlay of ash. He noticed one barely perceptible lump a few feet away. *Crap, the Sunday paper.*

He thought about sliding the door open, but decided a ton of ash would probably tumble right in. He walked back up to the kitchen, tucking in his tee shirt and rolling down the sleeves of his flannel. *Now what? Kill the lights.* He hit the switch, moved over to the sink and vaulted back onto the counter. Turning around on his knees to the window, he cupped his hands next to his eyes again. He could almost distinguish the silhouettes of the two trees in their front yard: a twenty-foot Asian ginkgo from the original landscaping and his ponderosa.

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Phillip thought about how Stephen still wanted him to get rid of the tree.

He had found it three years before on a logging road in mixed forest on the way up to a hiking trail. The pine was about three feet tall then and most of its needles seemed dead or pale in the shade of a Douglas fir. It took Phillip almost an hour to painstakingly unearth it from the hard dry ground. He cut the top off of a plastic water jug he kept in his truck, made a bed of loose damp soil inside and put in the ailing tree.

“What the hell is that you planted in the yard?” Stephen asked the next evening, a beer and a shot on his TV tray.

“*Pinus ponderosa*,” Phillip said.

“It’s a penis, all right. I try to make this place look right, and you stick in a dying piece of crap like that. Jesus, they must’ve spent twenty years getting them out of this valley.”

“All the more reason to plant it.”

“Spare me the ecology BS. It’ll brown up and die anyway.”

“I think it’ll make it.”

“Twenty bucks says it doesn’t.”

“Okay, twenty bucks,” Phillip agreed, knowing that a wager was one way to postpone an argument with Stephen.

Phillip nurtured the tree and watched it struggle until the previous autumn when its resting buds bulged noticeably. It burgeoned with lush green needles in April, but when Stephen noticed the fresh growth he said, “It still looks like a sick piece of crap to me.”

Soured by the recollection, Phillip looked down from the window, a pain clutching his intestines. *Take another damn pill.* He opened the bottle, ran some water into a small cheese glass, took the drug and looked out again. Beyond their two trees he saw the very dim outline of the Watson’s old pickup that hadn’t moved for years from its spot on the other side of the street.

It’s starting to lift—maybe the phones are working. He tried Lupe’s number on the kitchen phone, but it was answered by her roommate’s voice on their new answering machine: “. . . not able to come to the

phone right now . . . ” **Not able**—*sounds like the plague. Call her parents.* He disconnected without leaving a message then punched in the Sageview number but also got their machine. **Not able** again, *it’s a frigging epidemic. Guess I’m not able to talk on the damn thing.* Phillip roughly notched the receiver into the wall phone and then reached up for cereal.

He pried apart the top flaps of the new box then tried to pinch open the bag so it would fold up after he finished. Annoyed that the liner wouldn’t separate, he stabbed the top of the package with a paring knife, ripped it open, and then accidentally overfilled his bowl with the sugary flakes. He scooped out some of the extra with his hand and tried to put it back in the bag, but a shower of cereal drifted to the floor.

More crap to clean up. He rolled up the bag and smacked the cereal box angrily onto the counter. Finally, he added milk to the bowl and sprinkled a few raisins on top. Breakfast balanced in his hands, he trudged into the TV room. *Now, Bozo, see if you can keep it off the chair.* He sat down, ate a little, and saw the morning show was replaced by announcers from Four Rivers speaking in front of a generic file photo of a volcano.

Great job; just stick up Mount Fuji or something. The reporters mostly repeated what Phillip already knew, then the background changed to a shot of ash clouds and they began listing accumulations in the vicinity. *About time.*

“ . . . High Desert; Newbury and Sageview, about an inch; Masonville and Unger, two inches; and here in Four Rivers a bit more than an inch when it stopped falling hours ago. In neighboring counties . . . ”

Amazing, that close and only an inch. Lupe should’ve made it back okay. He crunched on a mouthful of the hard cereal.

“ . . . communities at the center of the ash fall’s path. Some had nearly twenty-four hours of total darkness and are just seeing first light. Hardest hit were Saddle Lake with about four inches, Ponderosa and Simmons reportedly with six . . . ”

Reportedly. *They don’t believe it. Man, six inches.*

GREY PINE

“ . . . and Lake Worth with about three. Though we have much less ash here in Four Rivers, the traffic is blowing it into the air, so everyone is encouraged to stay home if possible. Now, for the school closures; if you don't hear your schools mentioned, try your district number or you can call the Red Cross clearinghouse number listed below on your screen.

“Four Rivers Schools will be closed tomorrow and until further notice, probably two or three days. These districts are closed for at least today and tomorrow: Unger, Masonville, Mill Ridge, Otatop, Crofton, Stubblefield, Greenlee, and Wheaton, as well as . . .”

And us?

“ . . . Mercury, Coyote Springs and Newbury. Saddle Lake and Onion Corners will be closed for at least the rest of this week. And so far, three districts in our viewing area have said they're closed for the rest of the school year. They are: Redfield, Ponderosa and Simmons. Parents in those”

Though it was his first real sustenance since the previous morning, Phillip dropped his spoon into the bowl. *The rest of the year? The damn testing isn't finished; science fair Friday, and—this is bizarre, it's all just gone, a vacuum of everything that would've happened.* He looked back at the poolroom doors and the ash line on the glass. The phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. *Maybe that's Lupe—or him, from the hotel.* He put the cereal on the TV tray and walked toward the kitchen. *God, Stephen stuck at a convention, fox in the chicken coop.*

5

Guadalupe Rosendall met Phillip the previous fall in an anthropology class that included weekend bus trips to tribal cultural sites. While many of the students complained about assignments or “boring Saturdays,” Phillip and Lupe were enthused about the course. That commonality broke the ice for them and led him to believe there was some chance for a serious relationship, though he had long ago resigned himself to bachelorhood.

Phillip was convinced that women would always find him too peculiar or too cynical. He could accept the first of those judgments and go on his way, but the latter would win his accuser a pithy rejoinder about her naiveté. By his late twenties, Phillip thought he was ahead of the game if a relationship lasted long enough to allow him to get away from Stephen for a couple weekends. When there was casual companionship or sex, he considered it a bonus.

With Lupe, there were two firsts. Phillip actually shared some aspects of living with Stephen’s alcoholism, though not to the point of explaining his father’s divergent personalities. Lupe was also the first woman to remain with him more than a few weeks. She approved of most of her boyfriend’s idiosyncrasies and especially admired what she said was Phillip’s “maturity.”

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They thoughtfully weighed each other's opinions even when it came to religion. She spoke of her faith without proselytizing, and Phillip did the same with his agnostic views. It pleased him to disprove Stephen's prediction that their religious differences would be insurmountable. But Phillip admitted to himself that maybe there was something to Stephen's "high school crush" tirades. Here he was, a teacher pushing thirty and smitten by a stunning woman who looked so young at twenty-three that she would certainly be carded at any tavern, if she drank.

The phrase "dark good looks" never meant much to Phillip before he met Lupe. She had the obsidian eyes and dark brows of both parents, and she could cascade her galena-black hair halfway down her back, though she mostly wore it in some kind of ponytail. Phillip believed Lupe's beauty was enhanced by genetically influenced Semite and pre-Columbian facial features, especially her arching cheekbones and a moderately prominent nose that lent character to her face and accentuated her flawless cocoa-milk skin.

In high school, Lupe was encouraged by her peers to go out for drill squad and cheerleading, but she chose student government and the tennis team. One hot day in practice she saw some boys clowning around by the drinking fountain, pouring water on each other. She continued working on her serve until a female teammate came over and said that Lupe's sweaty shirt was sticking to her breasts, causing the boys' amusement. Because she had dealt with "titty jokes" since she was twelve, Lupe dismissed it as "their usual childish behavior." She didn't date much until the end of tenth grade, and even then, always on her terms.

Lupe's one driving incentive during her teens was to graduate early from Sageview High, though she did have a passionate hobby. Lupe and her younger sister raised, cared for and exhibited their family's horses. She also took every available Spanish course in school, with the goal of speaking her mother's first language. When she discovered they taught mostly grammar, Lupe privately criticized a system that awarded her highest honors in foreign language yet offered scant opportunity to actually converse.

Lupe's family and close friends weren't surprised when she graduated after eleventh grade and went off on a one-year church mission to Central America. Her father traded commodities with prominent families there and arranged for Lupe to live with one of them. She turned seventeen during that year and fell out of favor with the evangelists because she spent most of her missionary time helping abused women rather than converting them. Lupe grew very close to her Costa Rican "family" and became an accomplished speaker of Spanish. She also found her eventual career, and was now a year away from her Master's of Social Work at the state university in Four Rivers.

Phillip reached for the wall phone in the kitchen. He hadn't spoken to anyone for a day and a half except Mick, who didn't count, and he felt strangely let down about ending his solitary experiences with the ash fall. He answered the call hesitantly. "Lo?"

"Thank God. Are you okay?" Lupe asked, her tone anxious.

"Hi, Lupe, everything's fine. What about you?"

"Okay, now that we can talk. I'm at Mom and Dad's; I've been trying to reach you since yesterday. What a time for you to be all alone." Her words seemed to tremble through the static.

"Hey, don't worry, I'm okay." *Geez, why's she so upset?*

"Did you call a while ago? Someone hung up on the machine."

Crap. "I tried a lot of times; circuits were down. You can't believe the ash, half a goddamn foot, and—"

"Yes, Phil, I heard, but please."

You said goddamn. "Sorry." *Tell her about the clouds, the mouse, and the line on the door.* "Lupe, it was so incredi—"

"There's not even an inch here," she interrupted again.

"That's amazing. Probably smart to stay there a while."

"Oh I will," she said, still some panic in her voice. "My mom keeps saying He has certainly chosen to test us."

Let that one go. "Uh, did you get caught in the ash?"

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“Yes, it was so scary. We were still in Four Rivers when it started getting dark; we left right away, and then we couldn’t see at all. I thought we’d have to stop, but then it improved the closer we got to Sageview.”

“Lucky you didn’t end up in some cruddy school gym.” He intended that to be a droll comment to help her calm down.

“It’s not funny, Phil.”

Jesus, okay already.

“Last night at church people were so upset, praying so seriously. I prayed for you there.”

“Can’t hurt, right?”

“I’m glad you accept that it helps me.” Lupe waited for a response.

What can I say?

“Phil, give me a sec,” she said, her voice faltering.

Man, not like her at all. He waited, staring out the kitchen window into the false dusk. The two trees and the junk pickup were now barely visible, no longer just silhouettes.

“Sorry, Phil.”

“It’s all right.”

“They said there could be glass particles in the ash. You haven’t been going out a lot?” Her voice was steadier.

“A couple times.” *Liar.*

“I thought so.”

“I have a mask, I’m fine.”

“I was worried about you, maybe getting too excited about something like this.”

Something like this? “Jesus, Lupe, this is once in a lifetime.” *Crap, now you did it.* “Sorry,” he said again, scooting his rear end up on the Formica counter. He looked out, searching for some activity in the murk.

“It’s my fault; I sounded critical.” She had regained her usual confident tone. “I can’t believe how it got to me, that horrible drive, and then not being able to talk to you. But now, just hearing how interested you are—it changes my perspective; makes it seem less frightening.”

“That’s good, but I didn’t need to snap at you.”

"It's okay. Phil, did you hear about your school?"

"Yeah, it's strange; we had so much left to do, and just like that, it's over. It's weird how it just isn't going to happen, all that activity waiting there like a void."

"I hadn't thought of that; it is strange."

"Just thinking out loud. Anyway, now I have three weeks until I start with Putman," he said, more upbeat. "I'll need the extra time to clear our yards."

"What about ash up in the mountains?"

"The project is north; we missed the ash, I think."

"Phil, you know I appreciate the importance of the research, but there's not much you can do if a volcano stops it. Sometimes we have to, well, leave things in God's hands."

Man, all this really has her on a religious bug.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

Shut up, Stephen.

"Phil?"

"I'm here. I realize we're all limited, Lupe, but I think you know I'll do whatever I can to be ready to go, not to mention I need a break from Stephen."

"It's a shame you have to feel like that about your own father. You know, I do have background with some of his issues; I might be able to help."

No way. "Thanks, but that's just not in the cards," he said firmly, and there was dead air for a moment.

"Phil, maybe you should call and see if the volcano is going to affect your department."

"Yeah, that's a good idea." *At least I'd know.*

"If it doesn't come through, we'll make the best of it and have a great summer. I don't have a class, so we could kick back; take the horses up to the backcountry like I promised." Lupe had recently taught the reluctant "city boy" how to ride.

"You think I'm ready for that?"

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“Gabilan took to you right away, you’re a natural rider. Now if we could just dump that baseball hat for a Stetson—”

“No way, not in this lifetime.”

“Okay, but you really do need boots. Anyway, we can float the river and . . .” She went on proposing summer activities.

Yeah, sounds good, but the project comes first.

“. . . for the co-ed soccer league. Phil?”

“Uh, yeah, soccer won’t work, Lupe. Look, it won’t take me three weeks to clean up.” *I hope.* “We can do some things together before I go, and I’ll be home a couple weekends; it’ll go fast.”

“Maybe you’re right.” She paused, and when she started speaking again, it was in a soft, almost seductive tone. “Shorty, you know what?”

You’re up, Shorty. He didn’t answer her. She came up with that name on their one semi-formal date—her friend’s wedding. When he came by for her, Lupe called him “Shorty” because the low heels she was wearing made her a bit taller than Phillip. They laughed about it, and then she decided to change to some flats. When the name stuck, he wasn’t especially thrilled about it, but she only used it privately, always in that intimate voice.

The nickname was sometimes her signal for ardor in their affair, and she liked him to call her “Lupita” in the same sense, though she established clear limits to their sexual contact. Phillip assumed she was a virgin and didn’t push her at all, but it was Lupe who came up with what she called “our naughty little trick.” It started with heavy making out until they shed half their clothing, and then she would wait for him to put on a condom. Following her hands-above-the-waist rule, they kissed some more and writhed together until he came. Phillip wondered if she was somehow getting off as well and ventured to ask her once, but she wouldn’t talk about it.

“Shorty?” she repeated over the phone.

“Yeah, Lupita.” *Good boy, Phillip.*

“Mmm, you say my name, so perfectly.” She spoke with deliberate pauses. “There’s going to be some, long, beautiful evenings, and we can relax, and well, you know.”

Yeah, I know. His member crowded into the fabric of his jeans. “Lupe?”

“Just some backup plans, Phil. They sound fun, right?” she asked, her voice normalizing.

Especially that last part. “Sure, of course, just don’t count on all of it.”

“Things will work out, I—;*Míralo!* There’s the Suburban; I have to go help. I’m so glad you’re okay. Call me tonight?”

“Sure, Lupe.”

“Bye, Phil.”

“Bye.” He hung up the phone and shuddered, recouping from her provocative voice. He jumped off the counter, looked out again at the dull morning and saw the ash was all the way up to the bottom branches of his young tree. *Start right there.*

Phillip rushed into the TV room, past his soggy cereal and through the door to the garage. He turned on the light, glancing for a moment at his old Datsun pickup. *Lucky it wasn’t outside—chalk one up for the good guys.* He opened Stephen’s winter cabinet and took out the sturdy metal snow shovel and a push broom.

On his way back through the kitchen he stopped for his mask, the ruler and a house broom before clattering his way down the hall with everything. After leaning the taller implements on the wall, Phillip sat on the inside doormat and chose his tennis shoes from the footwear on the floor. As he tied them he wondered if ash would cascade into the house when he opened the front door.

He reached up, carefully twisting the knob; the door opened a crack but all that fell through was a pale beam of light. *Dope, the roof hangs over.* He stood and opened the door all the way. *My God.* The small porch was eerily clean; the ash had settled an inch above its front edge, eliminating the one step drop-off to the ground.

Incredible—but get with it. He walked out, stood short of the ash and put on the mask. His baseball hat in hand, Phillip scanned the sea of grey powder before him and sensed an undulation above what he

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guessed was the curb. Farther away, past the old truck in the street, he detected a blurry rectangle floating in the dry overcast, the Watson's double-wide modular. Their other dead cars and the piles of tires and wood pallets were invisible, as was their neighbor forty yards away. It felt like being on an island to Phillip; the Watson's place was a boat and its weak porch light searched through the ash-fog for other vessels. He stood still to listen; the only sound was the lonesome drone of a distant motor.

Move it. He went back in for the yard tools, then returned to the front of the porch. Phillip stepped up, and when his leg came down his shoe and lower shin vanished into the ash. He strode forward twice, lifting his knees like a heron in shallow water, the front wall of each deep footprint collapsing as he lifted his feet.

Like pushing through wet snow. He stooped and stuck the ruler straight down until it hit the ground. *Man, six and a half inches.* Phillip stood up, took about a dozen more paces, and then gently poked the branches of his tree with the kitchen broom until most of the clinging ash fell below. With the snow shovel and push broom he began excavating furiously from the ponderosa's base. After several minutes his work formed an unintentional circle around the tree, about eight feet in diameter. He switched back to the house broom and attempted to sweep the remains out of the exposed grass.

No, it's in there for good. That'll just make the soil more alkaline; shouldn't hurt his damn lawn. Phillip plodded back to the porch, then turned around to check his tracks. *Geez, the Nazca lines—a jellyfish.* The circle around the tree now had four long legs drawn by the ruts he'd made going out and coming back. *Cute. Now get back to work.* He picked up the snow shovel and started plowing the walkway, from the porch toward the street, shoving the ash to the sides onto the lawn's accumulation. *You're not doing crap until it's carried out of here. Yeah, but you need paths.*

After a few more minutes he stopped when he heard some scraping noises in the neighborhood. *Finally, somebody's out there.* He forced his way down to the street and swept off the mailbox and the

newspaper tube with the back of his hand. Out of habit, he checked for the morning paper.

Real smart; it couldn't be here without tire tracks. His proximity to the street allowed the Watson's undisturbed Jeep pickup to come into better view. A whimsical image came to Phillip of the disabled truck as a life-sized toy, replicated in thick grey frosting for a little kid's birthday cake.

Get going. He returned to the walkway and resumed his work. After a while Phillip noticed that his right hand was sore, but he kept on clearing. Halfway down to the street, his palm began to sting, so he stopped again and found a small broken blister on his hand, a larger one swelling next to it.

"Stupid shit," he said, and then stomped back to the house, angry about losing the work time. Although there was now ash all through the house, Phillip mindlessly followed Stephen's cardinal rule again and left his dirty sneakers by the door. After doctoring his hand in the bathroom, he found work gloves in the hall closet and returned to the porch to tie his shoes. *I'm not even to the sidewalk—gotta be ready if Putman comes through.*

6

Regardless of Mick Lewis, the next sixteen hours of purging the ash made Phillip begin to feel differently about how people on his side of the mountains were responding to the volcano.

He worked another half-hour on the front pathway before finally breaking through to the sidewalk, which took more than an hour to scrape. To the north, Phillip only cleared a few feet past the driveway as there was no immediate need for access to the wild golf course land. More than a hundred feet in the other direction, he would connect with the property of Gil Beck, an elderly widower who, in Phillip's view, was their best neighbor. Stephen once cussed out Beck for calling the cops when he and Mick were shooting guns in the air at one A.M. Stephen avoided Beck when sober, like he did most everyone, but Phillip later apologized to the neighbor.

Visibility had improved by the time Phillip reached Beck's clean sidewalk, and he could see their neighbor working near the street corner. *Way to go, Mister Beck.* They waved to each other.

Phillip's next chore would be the wide driveway up to their two-car garage; he estimated it would require as much work as he'd already completed. While he slogged through the ash up to the garage, Phillip heard a large diesel engine rattle from somewhere in the haze.



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The overhang from the garage roof had kept the ash from completely blocking the way, so Phillip only needed to scrape for a few minutes before he was able to open the double door. He walked in, turned around, and stood by his small tan pickup, contemplating the leaden sky and the grey expanse before him, still feeling very much like he was on an island. It was about two o'clock as he started in again, pushing ash toward the street, trying to take advantage of the gradual slope.

After a few minutes he heard the diesel engine clatter again, this time much closer. Phillip looked past Beck's where a fire truck, its redness blackened by the dirty air, slowly approached the corner, several men trudging behind its enormous wheels. They moved like ghosts through thick clouds of ash, one of them in dingy yellow garb like the driver. The truck stopped and a portly fireman climbed down with difficulty from the cab. They manned the hose in front of the dim headlights, opened the nozzle and aimed the strong flow toward the ground.

Phillip watched them turn the corner and start up the street. His spirits lifted by their industry, he flung the shovel toward the garage then took his paths down to the cleared sidewalk and jogged past the

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two front yards. At the corner he saw they had opened one lane from the highway, the muddy ash forced to both sides, sooty rivulets flowing away from the development. He watched the crew cut off the water and switch from the hydrant at the entrance to the one by Beck's house. Covered head to toe with ash, the workers in their particle masks looked like a team of surgeons in grey operating scrubs. They motioned for Phillip to join in, and he eagerly took a spot on the hose.

It took them fifteen minutes just to make it from the corner to the Stark's place. After Phillip ran up to move his tools and close the garage, the incessant force of the water pushed all the ash off the driveway and into Stephen's lilacs on both sides. When the stiff stream hit the young bushes a few of them snapped and most were half-buried. Though he knew Stephen would certainly fume over the ruined plants, Phillip turned with satisfaction to one of the men and they slapped a high-five.

For the next fifteen hours he stayed with the crew and its mission to free the cars and clear an escape to the highway. They liberated one block after another, and each fresh volunteer was as eager to help as the last.

The second fireman, about Phillip's age, barked instructions with a needless air of authority. Phillip decided the man was angry about being stuck on hose duty, although his much older cohort was in no shape to do anything but drive and supervise. After the young fireman taught new arrivals the basics of manning the pulsating hose, he sometimes left for long periods, and Phillip ended up explaining the procedures much of the time.

At about ten o'clock they took a long break when a Red Cross contingent showed up with sandwiches and drinks. Phillip chose the egg salad over the baloney, gulped it down with milk, and then scouted the next block while the others rested. By the middle of the night he'd lost track of time and didn't care that he and the two firemen were the only ones left from the original crew.

Shortly after a shrouded dawn they completed the last long block of Ponderosa Estates and were back near the entrance. The final group looked up at the grey-haired driver as the younger fireman climbed into the truck, scowling at his partner.

Still has a fork up his ass. He didn't do crap tonight. "Are we going to widen the lanes?" Phillip shouted over the knocking engine to the driver.

"Nope, next step is to scrape it and haul it," he yelled down to Phillip and the others. "It's back home for us before we meet ourselves coming and going," he said with a chuckle. "Our thanks to all you fellas, and good mornin' to you." He saluted the crew; most of them repeated the fireman's parting courtesy before they headed away in the sallow sunrise.

"So where's your next job for the rig, chief?" Phillip asked, his tone showing his readiness to keep working. The old fireman laughed, killed the motor, and Phillip saw the man's partner sullenly fold his arms and lean back.

"I'm not the chief, but I am the guy who's supposed to tell everybody to go home." His pink face was all the way out of the window. "You were a working fool out there, son, and I appreciate it. But after you sleep it off, you've got plenty to do at your place. I'd start with that roof if I were you."

"Man, I didn't even think about—"

"Yeah, you've got a load up there. Some of those farm worker shacks on the edge of town already collapsed." The other fireman had his hat over his eyes, trying to take a nap.

"I'd better get at it right away," Phillip said.

"As long as it doesn't rain, these houses here are okay. We heard it doesn't weigh much until it's wet."

"So scrape off the worst and take the hose to what's left?" Phillip asked.

"That's what I'd do after I got some sleep. You want a ride back?"

"No thanks, I'll walk."

"Okay, kid. Thanks again."

"No problem; it was great," he said, not caring that this man called him *kid*. The veteran fireman waved again, shook his head good-naturedly and started the engine.

Phillip watched the truck roll away then started walking up the

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cleared lane back toward his house. He felt a lump by his neck and fingered out a hunk of grimy material. It was the remains of the painter's mask he stopped using when the driver gave them the report that the ash wasn't harmful for most people to breathe.

He wadded the garbage into his pocket and began to check out the neighborhood. There was enough light filtering through for him to make out each house, and he was proud to see the exposed driveways as he strolled by. Though it was Tuesday morning when most everyone would usually be preparing for work or school, he didn't see much activity. Next to one of the few illuminated porch lights, a thick clump of ash remained on top of a large yellow bow displayed in honor of the hostages in Iran. Though that house was untouched, Phillip saw with satisfaction that most people had already been able to clear their paths and sidewalks.

By the time he got back to the house, the pall had lifted some more. Thinking he'd go right on working since he felt so good, Phillip went straight to the garage for the fruit-picking ladder Stephen bought at a farm sale. He carried it out front and then went back for his tools. The bulky ladder, narrow at the top and tapering to a very wide bottom, fit just right on the front porch. The brooms and snow shovel in tow, Phillip climbed to the top rungs and tramped through the ash up to the peak of the roof, which afforded him a view over the crabapple tree and into Mick's back yard. He knelt and held still when he saw Mick by the pool.

He heard Lewis cussing in his acerbic monotone, this time at two middle-aged Mexican men in straw cowboy hats and black aprons, conscripts from the dairy who often did his menial labor. While the men struggled to connect one of those barrel-shaped vacuums on wheels, they directed each other in Spanish, the muffled sounds of their conversation projecting all the way up to Phillip's elevated vantage point. Mick was in slippers and a robe, a beer can at the end of his fingers.

"Jesus Christ, wrong side," he said, deadpan, to the two men. "Put this end over there. No, goddamn it. Aw-kee—right there. You gotta know *some* fucking English by now."

What a prick. Phillip barely heard and didn't comprehend the workers' dialogue until one of them glanced at Mick and uttered, "*Pendejo*," an expletive Phillip learned from one of the few Mexican kids at Ponderosa High in his day.

Mick didn't know or didn't care that he was just insulted. "About goddamned time," he said when the water spurted from the fat hose, but the men were aiming it at the lawn. "Jesus, not there, aw-kee. It's called a fucking drain. You boys learn that word."

Boys—Jesus. "Aim it right in the *pendejo's* face," Phillip mumbled as they sent the flow to where Mick wanted it. For the first time since the previous morning, Phillip's intestines twisted, and then his enthusiasm for working ebbed like the water being sucked from the swimming pool. After Mick turned away, Phillip left his tools and slowly backtracked, descending to the porch. He idly brushed himself off, walked in and removed his encrusted shoes, leaving them with his hat and gloves by the door.

After a trip to the bathroom, he went in the kitchen for an ulcer pill and a cookie. In the TV room, Phillip ignored his old cereal and turned on the set. He leaned back in his recliner and bit off half the cookie. The local news was reporting emergency relief details, and he fell asleep after a few minutes.

The telephone woke him a few hours later, but before he could move, the ringing stopped. *Crap, you said you'd call Lupe.* Ali looked up from Phillip's lap, eyes half open.

"Hey, *gato*. What a couple of sleepyheads, huh?" He checked the clock. *Twelve thirty—could sleep some more—maybe go to bed for a while. No, enough sleep; back to the ash.* "You hungry, boy?" he asked, stroking his cat.

Phillip noticed the sunlight around Stephen's thick curtains was brighter than before. A quiz show yammered away on the TV. *Volcano, what volcano?* He snapped the recliner down to sitting position and the cat leaped off his lap, causing a puff of ash to float up from Phillip's jeans.

God, look at these clothes; you need a bath, too. He got up and took

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the rancid cereal to the kitchen and gazed out the window. His ashen jellyfish swam undisturbed in the yard, and the neighborhood was unchanged, except now there was enough light to give the impression it was just a very overcast day.

There's a lot more to do—the roof, then Stephen's lawns. He'll want them done yesterday, sure as hell. Wonder if Mick's still back there. Screw him; get after it.

Although it was afternoon, he began his morning routine and turned on the teakettle. As he petted Ali, Phillip's stomach felt hollow, but there was no sharp pain in his gut. He took another pill anyway, this time with a full glass of water, his thirst surprising him. Looking down toward the cat, Phillip saw a grainy mixture of pulverized cereal and tracked-in ash on the floor.

Later for that. “Got a new flavor for you to try; you’ve got to be getting tired of that tuna.” The cat circled and rubbed while Phillip retrieved the can from the top shelf and opened it. He scraped the food down into the bowl, but Ali took a sniff of the meat conglomeration and sneezed as if he were allergic to it. He sat and then glared up at Phillip.

“You fart, Ali. Here, maybe this’ll work.” He dropped a couple of kitty treats into the bowl, but the old feline nibbled them up without even contacting the rejected food. Ali defiantly licked his shoulder, gave Phillip a dismissive look, and trotted through the TV room and out the cat door.

Some creature is about to be his lunch. Just stick with the tuna. The teakettle whistled, and he prepared some acid-free instant coffee, a brand he recently discovered. Phillip started to reach up for some cereal, but the phone rang right by his arm.

“Hello,” he answered, before the first ring finished.

“Well whaddya’ know.”

Dad?

“I’ll be damned, I finally got you.”

It's Stephen. How drunk? “You’ve been calling?” He heard music, laughing and other tavern noise in the background.

“Three damn times yesterday,” he said, his voice calm.

Mildly belligerent, two or three drinks so far. “The lines have been out.”

“I heard they closed schools in Four Rivers. There too?”

“Yeah, rest of the year.” Phillip opened the fridge, wedging the telephone between his ear and shoulder. “Where are you?” he asked, and added milk to his coffee.

“At the hotel. If the damn airport doesn’t open tomorrow, I’ll rent a car.”

Phillip stirred his drink. “You’ve never driven that far.”

Stephen’s next words bristled. “How the hell do you know how far I’ve driven, or anything else for . . .”

You’re wrong, Phillip, he’s almost fried. He put the milk back, closing the door so hard it made the refrigerator wobble. *Easy, what did you expect?*

“ . . . don’t need *your* damn advice. Just tell me how bad the ash fall was.”

What’s he asking? “Uh, it was something,” Phillip said, downplaying his enthusiasm. “Turned dark at noon; Ali was—”

“Whole state’s in a disaster and he tells me about a damn cat he named after frigging Cassius Clay.” Stephen was blustering, showing off for someone in the bar.

Asshole. Phillip took a sip of the warm coffee.

“Just tell me how many inches of ash outside.”

“More than six.”

“Hah, six damn inches! I knew it from that map on TV; hold on. Okay,” he said, away from the phone, “pay up, dumb fucks.”

No way he can drive. You say that, he’ll freak. Phillip heard more ranting. *Nobody there is going to tell him.*

“Goddamn deadbeats.” Stephen paused. “You there?”

“Yeah.”

“They want proof. How can I prove we have six inches?”

“Shouldn’t be hard. The Chicago library probably has the paper from Portland or—”

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"Of course, the library, leave it to you; hold on. You damn cheapskates write down your room numbers. My son the schoolmarm figured it all" His voice faded.

Shit. He waited, grabbed a cookie, dunked it and ate it.

Stephen finally came back. "We'll nail the sonsabitches now."

Three cheers for us. Maybe it'll pay the bar tab.

"You there?"

"Still here," Phillip answered, biting another cookie.

"So, did you start on the ash?"

"That's all I've been doing," he said around a swallow.

"Are you eating something?"

"Cookie."

"Figures; and they pay you to teach health."

"Don't start."

"You look like crap, too."

What? "Thanks. Anything else?"

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You're at that damn school day and night, then you come home and don't do shit around the . . ."

Phillip held the phone away from Stephen's housework diatribe and surveyed the pallid moonscape out front.

". . . never do *any* damn work without me telling you. You listening?"

No. He moved the receiver closer. "Yeah, you finished?"

"When I'm damn good and ready. What're you using on the ash?"

"Brooms, snow shovel—" *Fire hose—no.* "I finished the walks and driveway; start on the roof today. I have to be ready to get out of here for the project."

"I forgot about the mountain lion bullshit; no wonder you're doing something. What about the house, you making a big damn mess?"

"Everything's dirty; ash comes right in." He glanced at the pile of dishes, then turned around to lean on the sink.

"Neat as a pin when I left."

No kidding. "I'll clean up before you get here."

“Sure, and don’t forget to screw the Mexican maid.”

“What did you say?”

“Relax, it’s a convention joke; you wouldn’t like it. My damn kid has no sense of humor,” he explained to somebody at the bar again.

“This from the man who laughs at *all* of Bob Hope’s jokes.” Phillip sipped his coffee.

“Shit, the whole world laughs at his jokes. You wouldn’t know a joke or an important man if you saw one.”

“Our mailman is just as important.”

“What kind of philosophical bull crap is that?”

This is pointless, stop egging him on.

“Shit, tell me if you saw Mick,” Stephen said.

I saw the prick. Mick the Prick—perfect.

“Answer me, goddamn it.”

“Yeah, I saw him.” With a thumb and forefinger, Phillip rubbed at the tension in his brows.

“So what’s he up to?”

“Bossing some men to dig out the pool. He was too dumb to put on the cover. I offered to help him before it filled up, and he told me to fuck off.” *If Lupe could hear me now.*

“Big deal. That’s just how he talks.”

“Sure.” Phillip brought his hand down from his forehead.

“If he was serious, maybe you should’ve stood up to him.” Stephen was chuckling.

Up yours. “I’m not afraid of your shitfaced friend.”

Stephen laughed again. “Jesus, just stay away from him.”

Stay away from dog crap. “Whatever you say, Steve.”

“Don’t call me that, goddamn it.”

Sure as hell won’t call you Dad. “Yeah, yeah,” Phillip said. *Enough—convince him not to drive.* “I think you should stay there. They’ll open the airport soon.”

“And how do you know that?”

“They only had an inch or so of ash in Four Rivers.”

“Either way, I’ll probably go tomorrow.”

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"You can't drive in the shape you're in."

"Stop nagging me, goddamn it. Shit, look at that, one of those bastards just walked in. I'm going to get his number. Hang on," Stephen said and was gone again.

Phillip waited, pondering the comment about "nagging." Before his mother died, she made a point of talking to him about his father's drinking. She said he returned from Korea as a weekend drinker and wouldn't talk about it. Ellen confided she was thankful he didn't drink even more and wasn't physically abusive. She told her son to find his own direction in life, but Phillip was sure she also expected him to watch over Stephen. Near the end, when she hardly recognized him, Phillip made her that pledge. Stephen seemed to know some kind of promise had been made, but he never actually voiced a suspicion.

Why do you even care what he thinks? What's he doing?

Stephen came back. "Got it; that'll be ten more bucks."

"Congratulations. If you drive tomorrow, call me before you leave." Phillip sounded ready to hang up.

"You just worry about getting your ass out of bed and cleaning the house."

Shit. "I told you I'll get the worst of it, but I'll be outside mostly." His voice rose with resentment.

"That house comes first, then you're not going anywhere until we get all that crap out of my yards."

"That's what I *am* doing. What do you want, blood?" *Take it easy, Phillip.*

"I'm going to a meeting," Stephen said and hung up.

A meeting—bull. Phillip slammed the phone into the wall bracket and then stood next to the piled dirty dishes. *Same ol' shit.* He massaged the inner corners of his eyes until they hurt. *Maybe he'll sober up for the drive.* Phillip lowered his arm and stared at the ashen landscape.

Haven't talked to Dad for weeks; it feels like he's dead. Tears clouded his vision, making his view of the yard seem even more somber. *Cry about it some more, that'll bring him back. Get a goddamn grip.*

7

Though he had spoken in general terms with Lupe about Stephen, Phillip only had one real confidant, his best friend, Warren, who now lived in Seattle.

They met during preseason open gym basketball at the beginning of Phillip's senior year. Phillip had barely made the "C" squad at his city school, but he loved the game and decided to give it a last shot with the Ponderosa Panthers. When word got out that the new guy had written an essay about wild felines, a basketball letterman named Sam Fike began calling Phillip "Panther Pussy" regardless of his tough play at their informal workouts.

Warren Sims was a freckled six-foot-eight redhead who was finally going to be starting center as a senior after taking years of verbal abuse as the tallest, skinniest and smartest kid in town. He was a late-in-life only child of a local couple who had planned to leave him the family farm until it became obvious that their inheritor was destined for a different career.

One afternoon in the gym when a couple of players were harassing Phillip, Warren held the ball and told them to "shut up and play the damn game."

"*You* shut the fuck up," Sam Fike said back to Warren. Sam was a

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muscular six-footer whose role on the team was to rip down rebounds and immediately pass off to teammates who could actually dribble and shoot the ball.

"That's more than two syllables, ape; nice job," Warren answered, the others hooting in delight at the new nickname. "It's almost five," Warren added with a shrug, "I'm outta here."

"Shit, you and Panther Pussy must be in a hurry to go for a little sixty-nine," Sam said, and the players howled again.

"Fuck you, Fike," Phillip said calmly, catching the group off guard for a moment. Then they began chanting, "Fuck-you-Fike, fuck-you-Fike," pleased with the alliteration.

"Talk to me again, pussy," Sam said to Phillip, "and I'll kill a fucking cat for every word you say." A Phys. Ed. teacher at the other end of the gym moved toward them.

"Fuck you, Fike," Phillip repeated.

After the tussle was broken up, they walked away and Warren told Phillip that Fike was all talk. The next day at lunch hour Phillip had to hold back his rage when he found three mutilated cats in his pickup. That evening he grimly buried the scrawny feral animals in the foothills and plotted his revenge.

The police came to school on Friday morning to ask him if he knew anything about Sam's car. Phillip shook his head innocently, said he knew nothing about it and thought, "Three dead cats; four dead tires." At the next open gym on Monday, Fike called him "a crazy little queer" but let it go after that because their coach heard about the feud and threatened to cut Sam from the team.

Warren in math, Phillip in science, they were Mutt and Jeff with some smarts, though only Warren was an honor student. When basketball began officially, Phillip was adept at getting Warren the ball in the post; they both made starting five and became better friends than with any of the kids from their childhoods.

Phillip had no idea that his season in the basketball limelight would one day affect his career. After graduating, he didn't even get away from

home for college. He entered the state university in Four Rivers and commuted forty miles to his classes for five years. He took prerequisites for a major in zoology and then switched to science education to improve his chances of obtaining a job not too far from his father.

His only long break from Stephen during college was working a five-week summer camp as a counselor in the nearby mountains. Even then, Phillip arranged to leave on Sundays to check up on Stephen and make sure he was taking care of Ali. The fledgling educator led the hiking and climbing activities at camp, and by his last year there he was teaching some environmental science.

A college advisor recommended that Phillip minor in physical education because school districts, she said, often gave hiring advantage to coaches. So he endured the tedious health/P.E. curricula and judged the courses in his science major to be watered down and pedantic. By the time he passed the required doses of educational theory and practice, Phillip decided that some of his professors hadn't set foot in a school for years, and only a few were the dedicated "teachers of teachers" he expected. He kept his dissatisfaction to himself, his grades were better than in high school, and he received good recommendations from student teaching.

Ponderosa School District, it turned out, was eager to hire one of its former basketball players for an opening at the junior high. As Phillip's astute advisor had foreseen, he was selected ahead of experienced science teachers who were not prepared to teach P.E. and coach boys' basketball.

Phillip felt challenged and motivated from the outset by his teaching at Ponderosa Junior High. He tried to organize field studies for his life-science classes, but the principal said the concept would be disruptive and that all trips had to be pre-approved before the school year. Phillip made due with the campus as his "natural environment" and decided he would wait until after the Panther Cubs basketball season to press the issue.

After both his teams played well for the first time in years, Phillip

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wrote a proposal for a hands-on project in fisheries management. Unaware of protocol, he showed up at a school board meeting with handouts and diagrams. When the agenda opened for community input, Phillip began his presentation, but the chairman politely interrupted. He said they would be delighted to consider the proposal when administration placed it on their agenda. Phillip's supervisor smirked and whispered a comment to his crony from the high school. Humiliated, Phillip sullenly took his seat and saw the two principals share a chuckle at his expense.

The day after the meeting he was called into the office before school. The principal sat behind his large desk as Phillip entered the room in attire that doubled for the classroom and gym—dark-colored jeans, sport shirt and sneakers. The principal, a grim sneer on his face, offered Phillip the black interrogation chair usually occupied by one of the school's bullies.

"Just another bad boy," Phillip thought. He decided to look out the window to show his disinterest while the principal wrote solemnly on a school form as if the world eagerly awaited his report.

Phillip's supervisor was in his late forties, a burly five-foot-ten and flat-faced, his black hair chopped into a crew cut. He wore a brown tie and yellow shirt; part of a tattoo showed below one sleeve, enough to figure out the whole image was a blue snake and DON'T TREAD ON ME. The principal looked up from his desk.

"Mister Stark, tell me why you're making such a big deal out of our science curriculum," he said, his voice brusque.

"Like I said before, life science requires application in the outdoors, you can only do so much with a textbook." Phillip's tone was frank but not impertinent; he glanced at the kids in the courtyard. "We have no lab facilities, and we're barely allowed to go outside." He settled back into the stiff plastic chair.

"I think you're overstating things."

"Okay, we have a couple antique microscopes and we can go on the athletic field," Phillip said with mild sarcasm.

“You know, Stark,” he answered, deliberately less formal, “if you hadn’t made such a fool out of yourself the other night, you could’ve embarrassed us. Let’s clarify a few things. We know you’re a good coach, and you have potential as a teacher, but your final evaluation is coming up . . .”

To Phillip, that was a threat from a man who wouldn’t know teaching potential “if it bit him in the ass.”

“ . . . assume that you’ve learned, Stark, that ambushes at board meetings are not the way we do things around here. Proposals have to be written and go through us, and we expect you to talk to us before you show up in front of the board.”

Phillip faced him. “Would you approve a proposal?”

“Probably not.” He tapped a pencil impatiently on his phone.

“What if some of us go to the school board to ask for better equipment?”

The principal shook his head. “I think I’ve made myself clear. Do you think you can live with that, Stark?”

“Guess I’ll have to.” He looked away again.

“That’s right. Good, I’m glad you understand that.” He smiled briefly as if there had been some mutual agreement.

“So that’s it?” Phillip started to get up.

“There’s one more thing. We’re concerned that you’re getting a little bit too close to your students.”

“What?” Phillip said, standing up, managing to keep most of the indignation out of his voice.

“You’re too personal with them. They’re students, not your little buddies.”

“No, I haven’t crossed that line.” The school district’s ‘dirty little secret’ dawned on him. “Does this have anything to do with my predecessor being moved to the high school?”

“You shouldn’t listen to rumors, Stark.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it’s less likely he’ll diddle with kids over there.”

“I suggest you drop it and think about *your* situation. You don’t know these families. It’s not like the old days when we could count on

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some respect. A lot of these kids would just as soon spit in your face as talk to you.”

“That hasn’t been my experience.”

“Oh? So you’re saying you know them better than I do?”

“No, I just don’t agree with you.”

“I suppose that’s what they’re teaching at that college.”

“Can’t say, but I’ll tell you a quote I heard in one of my classes.”

Nonplused by Phillip’s response, the principal eyed him suspiciously.

“This isn’t word for word,” Phillip began, not sounding strident. “This famous guy said that our youth live in luxury; with bad manners. He said kids had no respect for their elders; that they’re like tyrants. What do you think?”

“I’d probably agree with most of that.”

For effect, Phillip waited, a sedate look on his face. “That was Socrates, about four hundred B.C., the good ol’ days.”

“For a quiet guy, you really are a smart ass, aren’t you, Stark? I give you two years until you burn out.”

Though Phillip’s sixth year of teaching had come to an abrupt end two weeks early, school wasn’t on his mind as he frowned at the pile of dishes in the sink. *Screw ’em; just get dirty again. How do you like that, Stephen?*

He saw his accidental jellyfish out front in the ash. *God, look at all that stuff. Call Lupe; make it quick, then get the roof.* He picked up the phone and punched in her parents’ number. Phillip drank his cold coffee and listened to the irritating clicks of the dialing pulse. He remained standing and scanned the yard.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Lupe, sorry I couldn’t call.”

“Hi, Phil. I tried you this morning and last night a bunch. It would be nice if you had an answering machine. They’re really very useful.”

Not for me they aren’t. “Actually, I was out all night.”

“You were?”

“I was on a fire hose; we cleared driveways and made a lane through the whole development,” he said, almost boasting.

“Sounds like you were working awfully hard.”

“Didn’t even notice it. I’ve never seen so many people act like that before. It was great.”

“Act like what?”

“Everyone pitching in, cooperating; sounds corny—”

“Not at all. Church fellowship is like that sometimes.”

“Everybody *wanted* to do this.”

“That’s not any different, Phil.”

Drop it, now. “Anyway, you can’t believe the mess out there, especially the roof. I can’t talk a long time.”

“Okay, I’ll keep it short. Phil, I called about soccer . . .”

Great. He jumped back onto the counter, his heels banging lightly on the cupboards below.

“. . . they want you on our team, they don’t care if you miss games.”

“Lupe, I’d miss most of them. It’s been a couple days; Putman hasn’t called; I think we’re on.”

“You haven’t called them?”

Don’t want the wrong answer. “Been busy; I’ll get to it.”

She was silent a moment. “Phil, you worry me—working all night like that, and you haven’t been looking well and . . .”

What? I get to hear this again?

“. . . you losing weight? I noticed when we were, uh—”

Eating? Doing our little thing maybe? She can’t say it.

“Will you say something?” she said, a little bit cross.

“No, I’m not losing weight.”

“When we go out, you mostly have French fries and pop.”

Enough of this. “Lupe, I’m fine.”

“Phil, I was too upset to talk about it yesterday, but your father agrees with me.”

“About what? You talked to him?” He stopped swinging his legs and wound his ankles tightly together.

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“Yes, last week. I called when you weren’t home.”

Shit! “When did you call? What day?”

“I called him on purpose,” she said with self-assurance.

“For God’s sake, why did you do that?”

“I can’t talk to you if you’re going to yell at me.”

Not yelling. “I can’t believe you called him.”

“He was very sweet. He doesn’t seem as bad as you say.”

He’s worse. “Lupe, you—”

“I had a very nice talk with him . . .”

Perfect.

“ . . . he agreed with me that you aren’t taking care of yourself.”

Goddamn it, taking care of both of us. “If you wanted to know that kind of crap, why didn’t you talk to *me*?” He angrily back-kicked his intertwined heels against the cupboard, causing an ear-splitting clap.

“What was that, Phil?”

“Nothing. Lupe, I’m pissed you spoke to him.”

“When I mentioned before how tired you look, you wouldn’t answer. I care about you, Phil, so I asked him. I’m sorry I’ve upset you; but you can’t hide me from him forever.”

The hell I can’t; he’d ruin everything. Take it easy. “Remember what I told you he said about your parents?” he asked, somewhat calmer.

“Yes, but how can he get over that if he doesn’t know me? Phil, you should’ve heard him the other night. You don’t know how nice he was to me.”

Phillip felt his calves fatigue so he unwound his ankles and slid down. “Yes, I do know; that was my dad you were talking to.”

“Well of course it was.”

“You don’t know what I mean. Next time you try to call, he might tell you to go to straight to hell.”

“I don’t believe that, not for one minute.”

Jesus. “I really have to get to work, Lupe.”

“Even if he’s drinking, I don’t believe he’d say that. When does he get back from Chicago?”

She won't drop it. "He's stuck there, probably has to drive."

"Well, then the coast is clear for me to come over," she said with a hint of sarcasm.

I'll be on the roof. "Lupe, this end of the highway is closed." He exhaled a deep breath and stared out the window again at the untouched layer of ash surrounding the walkways.

"They said it'll probably open tomorrow—I can't come until then anyway."

"I thought driving in this stuff bothered you."

"Only in the dark. I'll borrow the Sherman tank." That was Phillip's name for her mother's Suburban. "I'll take it real easy," she said, now sounding covert, as if her sister was trying to listen in. "You've been alone for days, Shorty. I think you need some, uh, human contact."

Man, bringing out the big guns. He didn't answer.

She went on, very softly. "I want to see the deep ash and—we'll be all alone. Shorty, should I come over?"

Who do you think you're kidding, Phillip? No way you'll turn this down. "Uh, tomorrow's fine, Lupe," he said.

"Not much of an invitation."

He tried to sound more sincere. "Come on by, Lupita."

"I'll bring fresh corn, Shorty, and some home cooking. Get some meat on those cute ol' bones—sound good?"

Man-oh-man. "Yeah, sure."

"Okay, see you tomorrow about noon. I miss you, Shorty."

"Miss you too, Lupita. Bye."

"Bye."

Phillip hung up the phone, aware of his aching erection as he turned around. *Your brains are in your pants, Shorty; she thinks she can help Stephen, know him for God's sake. If she knew what he's really like.* He felt his arousal begin to slump. *What's this BS about my health—from both of them?*

Phillip whisked out white bread and peanut butter and reached over for a banana. He bit off the black nub, stripped the peels, and then

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hacked away at the fruit with a kitchen knife. *Shorty Stark, that's me all right, sounds like a cook on a friggin' wagon train. Rustle up the grub, Shorty; coffee tastes like piss, Shorty. Chop your damn banana, Shorty.*

After spreading great globs of smooth peanut butter on two slices of soft bread, he stuck the poker-chip-sized pieces of banana on both slabs and then triumphantly smacked them together. *Check this out—losing weight, my ass.* Like a character in an old black and white cartoon, Phillip chomped a huge half-moon out of his sandwich, then plopped it onto a paper plate.

He donned his flint-grey baseball hat, lifted a can of soda from the fridge and headed for the door, food in one hand and beverage in the other. He put his lunch down, slipped on his shoes, tied them, then stuffed the work gloves in his jeans and the pop can in the chest pocket of his flannel shirt.

Outside, Phillip circled the wide ladder and started up, balancing the plate on one palm like a ritzy waiter with a tray. At the edge of the roof he turned around, sat, and let his feet dangle while he took a second bite from his sticky creation. He panned across the barren block; Mister Watson was the only one in sight, his dim silhouette sweeping off junk in his yard. Phillip gulped some soda, twisted the can into the ash and perched the plate and sandwich on top.

If Lupe's coming tomorrow, you'll have to make up for it today. He got to his feet, climbed to the apex of the roof and picked up the snow shovel. Down at Lewis's, Mick was gone, and all Phillip could see of the two workers were straw hats and the grey mud they were heaving out of the deep end of the waterless swimming pool.

Good, Mick's sleeping it off. Do this side first before he comes out. After the first push from the top of the house, Phillip watched the massive bulk of ash cascade into the back yard, causing a cloud that billowed right back up to the eaves. Pleased that gravity made this part of the task so easy, he briskly shoveled off a ten-foot-wide swath, but after he went over it with the brooms he found the slits between the wooden shakes were still solidly packed with residue.

He went back down for the garden hose and hauled it back up to the top of the cleared area and turned the nozzle on full blast. Though he was eager to resume scraping, Phillip had to squirt the length of each vertical crack to force out the ash, and after a half hour he hadn't even finished that one section.

When he was finally satisfied, Phillip turned off the nozzle and went back by the ladder to retrieve the snow shovel. He picked it up and didn't notice the little mess a few feet away. A breeze had carried away the paper plate, spilling the rest of the peanut butter and banana sandwich into the muddy soot.

8

Though Phillip was twenty-nine, his bedroom was both a boy's and a man's place. He still slept in the same bed that Stephen Stark built into a racecar frame when Phillip was eight. When he was ten, Phillip furtively sawed off the bumpers and fins and covered the hot rod flames with three shades of green paint. He soon added bushes, tree trunks, Tarzan vines and an ocelot copied from the encyclopedia. A few weeks later on a two-six-pack Friday night Stephen rebuked Ellen for allowing the boy to transform the frame. She quietly defended Phillip's right not to be enthused about racecars and suggested tactfully that Stephen should be proud to have taught him how to accomplish the remodeling. Reading a comic on the bed in question, Phillip heard his inebriated father retort with a half-hearted "Bullshit," the limit of disrespect he ever showed for his wife.

Stephen and Ellen were childhood sweethearts in the same Seattle neighborhood where Phillip and his sister, Joann, later grew up. Ellen was three-fourths Scandinavian and was proud she knew a few Danish words and some old country cooking. After Ellen and Joann returned from Sunday services, Phillip's sister sometimes recruited him to help pester their mother for a batch of *Aebelskiver*, buttermilk-soured dough balls fried in a special cast iron seven-cratered skillet. Ellen insisted they

eat the first ones traditionally with applesauce; then Stephen and the two kids would douse the rest with butter, powdered sugar, jam and syrup.

Ellen worked as a medical secretary, but she lived for her time at home with family, pets, the vegetable garden, and her artistry—sculpturing. Young Phillip was very impressed when she won awards for her striking fired-clay figures of animals. Long before Ellen was ill, he was convinced she regretted deferring her art for economic necessity. Weeks before her death, Phillip broached that subject on a drive to the hospital and was surprised when she explained how content she was with her life, “both its smooth strokes and its rough notches.” Without self-pity, she said her only regret was smoking since she was fifteen. Ellen Stark continued her job and her craft until she was regularly hospitalized, and she managed to cook a batch of *Aebelskiver* for Phillip and Stephen a couple of weeks before she died.

The most prized possession Phillip kept in his room was his mother’s sculpture of a life-sized manx she gave him after the piece won a blue ribbon at a county fair. He displayed the cat at the center of his oak desk, another old carpentry project of his father’s. It pleased Stephen back then that young Phillip liked to draw and study at the wide roll-top. Those were mixed, confusing realities for the boy: the flawlessly crafted desk and his dad, the racecar bed and Stephen the Friday-night drunkard.

After the bereaved Starks moved to Ponderosa, Phillip felt both resolved and doomed to honor his pledge to look after his father. It was around then that Stephen’s housekeeping began to transform from orderly into compulsive. When there was any lull in his cycle of drinking, sleeping, and recovering, he would morosely clean the house or manicure the yard. Perfectionism he once had for woodworking was relegated to dustless counters and precisely trimmed grass.

Since tools and machinery filled their third bedroom, Stephen decided to build a shop on the back of the garage. Phillip encouraged the project, hoping it would rejuvenate his father’s hobby. When Stephen’s interest began to lag, Phillip would start difficult tasks or

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pretend to be stumped. Stephen figured out the ploy one day and, without a word, tied his apron to an unfinished truss and walked into the house for a nap. He was drunk a few hours later and told Phillip he was a “meddling little shit.”

When the shop was finally complete, they moved the saws, lathes and drills out of the house, and Stephen told his son to take the large master bedroom with the half-bath because he had “so much crap.” Phillip built ceiling-to-floor shelves right away, and by the time he graduated from college nearly half of the wall space was taken up with books.

He kept many old animal-related novels like *Sounder*, *Incredible Journey*, and *Incident at Hawk’s Hill*. His library also included the family’s encyclopedia, some children’s science series, his texts and technical books, the first James Herriot novels, the works of Jane Goodall and Joy Adamson, and his expanding collection of publications about felines.

Phillip had everything from coffee table books about panthers and mountain lions to the latest research on the lynx—anything that added to his knowledge of wildcats, especially those from the Western Hemisphere. Posters, drawings and photos of cougars, bobcats, lynx, jaguars and ocelots dominated the rest of the wall space along with some maps, charts, and yellowed newspaper clippings of the 1977 Portland Trailblazers.

On the oak desk there was also a recent picture of Lupe and a framed photo of his parents cheesing toward the camera without cigarettes or booze. They were at a fish and chips stand near a ferry terminal in British Columbia. As far as Phillip knew, it was the only real vacation they ever took.

He kept his typewriter and some reference books on an eight-foot worktable by the door, where he did research and lesson plans and listened to John Fogerty and Neil Young on his small stereo. A shelf over the table displayed framed specimens of insects and dried plants, a Y-shaped branch of petrified wood, and a softball-sized polished geode with a tiny crystalline white cave at its center.

The room’s long walk-in closet was less than a fourth taken up by a

small dresser and Phillip's pragmatic clothes. The shelf and floor space overflowed with science materials, collections, low-priority books, hiking gear, sports equipment and leftover junk from his youth, including one withering cardboard box filled with dozens of old *Uncle Scrooge* comics.

On Lupe's only visit to the half-empty bedroom he told her he liked to be able spread out, but she said the room was sparse, that he needed more furniture. She despised the brown and orange wall-to-wall low pile carpet and its monotonous, coiling *fleur-de-lis* design, but Lupe thought his bed was "cute," and they laughed about it while making out over his juvenile rendition of a wildcat in the rain forest.

For the first time in three days Phillip slept in his jungle bed instead of the recliner. After spending the rest of the previous day on top of the house and garage, it became too dark to finish the last row of ash, so he finally came in and took a shower. When his head began to nod halfway through a TV dinner and the rerun of *M*A*S*H*, he turned off the set and went to bed.

Now he was sleeping on his stomach, Ali by his head. The old white cat reached up and pawed some strands of Phillip's disheveled dark-blond hair, tickling his ear.

What?—Uh, Ali. The cat burrowed into Phillip's shoulder. "Morning, boy. What do you want? Too early to eat," he said, looking over at the clock on the shelf. *Man, eleven ten—slept twelve hours. I could sleep even more.*

"Okay, so it's almost time, let me wake up," he said, turning onto his back and closing his eyes again; but the cat activated his purring apparatus and parked next to Phillip's ear. Ali's rattle as well as a sibilant wind under the eaves overtook his consciousness.

"Geez, you're relentless," he said, and then sat up to pet the cat. "Bad hunting last night?" *Listen to it blow out there; it should be lighter by now.* He swung his feet down to the rough carpet, turned toward the

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flimsy curtains and watched them flap crazily in the air. Ali immediately ran for the door; but Phillip stood up to go to the dim window. He stopped after a few steps, stretched his stiff back and then moved on. He saw a dusting of ash on the floor, looked up and pushed the curtains aside, but couldn't even see the back yard. The strong wind had churned the ash into a thick grey storm.

"I'll be damned." *Looks like the first day.* Phillip slid the pane closed and went right back to the foot of the bed for his dirty jeans. He pulled them on and hurried to the chest of drawers in the closet for some more clothes. He sat on the carpet to slip on his socks, the cat peering at him from the door.

Check the front yard. Jesus, all that work. "Yeah, Ali, hold your horses, lunch will be a minute." Tucking in his clean tee shirt, he rushed to the bedroom door and then down the hallway, the cat running effortlessly in front of him. Phillip's stocking feet slid as they hit the cereal crumbs and ash on the kitchen floor, and he caught himself by grabbing the counter. He saw ash on the dishes as he closed the window, and out front the two trees were invisible in the turbid air.

Great. Ali rubbed Phillip's leg, impatient for his food. "Back in a minute," he said, and hastily shut two windows on the way to the front door. Phillip stepped into his bedraggled tennis shoes without tying them and spotted his flannel shirt and baseball hat clumped into a corner. He put them on, opened the door, and walked below the overhang, squinting. Like sand blowing into a windshield, the agitated grey sediment ticked against the exposed skin of his face, neck and hands.

Phillip turned his back to the gale, stepped off the porch and bent down to pull up his shoelaces. After tying the bows he checked his footprints. *Already an inch where I cleared. What about the roofs?* Extending an arm over his face, Phillip leaned into the flying grit and walked away to look for the ladder he left by the garage. He located it then clambered to an upper rung where the air seemed clearer than below. He inspected the shakes and found only a light dusting in the cracks. *All right, it's too heavy to blow back up here.* His intestines growled then gnawed into an ulcer pang.

Get a damn pill. Regardless of his sore back, he scuttled down the ladder and made it over to the front porch. His arm still over his eyes, he turned back to the walkway. *Shit, everything's buried again. If this wind ever stops, you get to do it all over.* He stomped into the house, slammed the door furiously, and stopped to remove his shoes. Standing on one leg, he pulled at the heel of a sneaker. *To hell with this, the house is already full of ash.*

Get those damn shoes off.

Screw you, Stephen. Phillip tried to forefinger the shoe back onto his foot, but the canvas was bent underneath, and he hobbled down the hallway.

"Damn it!" he yelled, and tugged on the fabric again, bracing himself on the wall with his other arm. Ali fidgeted and stared impatiently from the kitchen, showing no more rubbing or purring business. As Phillip stumbled on with a knuckle in his shoe, the cat howled; it would have been a roar in a larger feline's body.

Phillip yanked the sneaker off, stood straight up and shouted, "Shut the hell up!" He launched the tennis shoe, it smacked against an upper cupboard, and the cat jerked and watched it land on the counter. Not seeming to make the connection that the missile was meant for him, Ali looked hungrily toward Phillip, who was at the doorway gawking wide-eyed at the scene of his deed.

You crazy bastard, Phillip. He walked up to his pet. "Sorry, Ali," he said, trying to atone by rubbing the cat's ears, but Ali growled and pulled away.

"Okay, okay." Phillip grabbed a can of cat food from the cupboard and rummaged through the dirty dishes for the opener. *Last can of tuna, save half of it, jerk.* The cat changed his tune immediately and started to head-butt Phillip's calf. He mixed the canned food with some dry, put the bowl on the floor, and Ali began to purr as he gobbled his lunch.

He's so into eating maybe he forgot what you did. Phillip's gut constricted again, so he reached up for his ulcer prescription and a non-aspirin for his back. He took the drugs then watched Ali, who was consuming the tuna less ravenously. *What a prick; you could've hurt him.*

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Goddamn worthless ghost cat.

Fuck you.

Ali stopped eating and looked up, licking his jowls.

“Sorry, boy,” Phillip said, but the cat seemed to sneer before walking away into the garage.

He'll probably take off; he knows what you did all right. He faced the kitchen window. It was like an oversized TV telecasting grey and black interference; Phillip just stared into the void and would have been accused of daydreaming if someone were there. After a couple minutes he sensed some movement in the TV room.

Shit, wake up. He turned toward the back door and saw Ali settling into Stephen's recliner. *He didn't like the wind.*

Get him the hell outta my chair.

“Stay there all you want, Ali,” Phillip said, “he won't be back for a while.” He watched the cat curl up and go to sleep, then tried to decide what to do with himself.

Lupe won't know how bad it is here. He called her, but the circuits were down again. *She won't get here for hours, if at all. As soon as it stops, you can get back to work. Check the weather.*

He went to the TV room and petted Ali, but the cat ignored his touch. *Feels like somebody else threw the damn shoe. No, it was you, asshole.* Phillip realized he had been walking around with one shoe, so he took it off, tossed it into the kitchen and turned on the set. Glancing over at Ali, he twisted the dial through the channels. He came back to the first station. *God, quiz shows and soap operas—try the radio.*

Phillip walked through the kitchen then turned right and opened the sliding doors Stephen installed to partition off their living room. Since the doors were always closed, it seemed like they had one long hallway from the kitchen down to the bedrooms.

While Stephen's shop was testimony to a moribund hobby, the living room was his monument to Ellen Stark. He maintained her colonial furniture so well over the years that the wood finish looked showroom new. A red, white and blue afghan Ellen knitted for her

husband was folded perfectly as a flag and lay unused on the long sofa. On an oak coffee table between the matching living room chairs, Bambi and Bashful and other glazed porcelain critters and gnomes grinned perpetually next to Ellen's sculptures of two small-scale bloodhounds, the only pieces she didn't give away.

Behind the sofa, a never-kindled white brick fireplace and a picture window to the back yard took up most of the long wall in the rectangular room. Ellen's sewing-circle quilt, each black square enclosing a bright butterfly, covered the far wall. The ladies in her group remembered Phillip as a boy watching the project take form, and they presented it to him after Ellen's funeral. Like the manx in his bedroom, the quilt was a valued memento, and Phillip made it clear to Stephen that it hung in there only on loan.

Stephen also saved his wife's family photos and displayed the framed ones in a long row on top of the secondhand Baldwin that Ellen bought for Joann when she quit high school sports her senior year to play piano. Ellen had hoped she would go on to college and take music, but Joann got married and the only encouragement she had to continue studying died with her mother within a year.

Stephen referred to the room as "mother's parlor," but Ellen Stark, of course, was never in there. When Phillip once tried to stretch out to read on the couch, he felt uneasy around her carefully preserved things. The cloistered room also reeked of cigarettes notwithstanding Stephen's regular cleaning, so Phillip rarely stayed in the parlor for more than a few minutes.

Although he thought the memorial to his mother would be perceived by anyone else as morbidly sentimental, Phillip didn't criticize Stephen about it. He eventually convinced him to move the family stereo in there, but only because Phillip agreed to wire speakers into the poolroom, since no one would be allowed to "party" in Ellen's shrine.

Now Phillip moved by the piano and the furniture to the casket-sized stereo cabinet and wrote "P. S." with his finger in the film of ash that had sifted onto the polished wood.

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He'll completely freak; better start cleaning. Dishes first, I guess. He opened one of the cabinet doors, turned on the radio and tuned into an AM station that always advertised itself as "The news leader for Four Rivers and beyond." Phillip listened to a caller who was ranting to the announcer.

" . . . that's all we ever hear about is how bad it is over on the west side. Well, people are suffering here, too . . . "

Who the hell is suffering? He sat on the arm of the couch.

" . . . people can't go to work, they're low on fresh food at the stores, and nobody's doing anything about the roads . . . "

Maybe in your neighborhood, lady.

" . . . now the wind is blowing it all back. This is a big disaster here, and nobody cares, I still say they should—"

"Excuse me, ma'am, how much ash at your place?" the host asked.

"Nearly two inches, and—"

"Do you have food, water and shelter?"

"Well, yes."

"Do you have anyone to help you with the cleanup?"

"My kids, but—"

"Ma'am, I know it's been difficult for everyone, but sometimes we need to count our blessings . . . "

Yeah lady, and shut up while you're at it.

" . . . out of time for your calls. Weather, news, just ahead," he said, and then a pre-recorded commercial came on. "Tired of trimming grass the old-fashioned way?"

Look outside, Bozo. He switched on the den speakers then backed out of the room, looking through the wide window at the airborne ash. *Doesn't seem any worse.* He closed the sliders, started up the hall and could hear the radio ahead.

" . . . accept no substitute, it's the Cadillac of weed trimmers . . . "

I'll take the Datsun trimmer, thank you. He returned to the kitchen while a new commercial harped on about the "ash cleanup sale" a car dealer was having at "the only clean lot in town."

He saw Ali was no longer in Stephen's recliner so he called for the cat and tried twisting the can opener. *Guess he took off—nice going, Phillip.* He cracked eggs into a bowl to start some French toast, listening to the speaker in the den.

“ . . . that message brought to you by your friends at Four Rivers Dodge-Plymouth, who remind you that the big cleanup sale will resume as soon as it's safe again to travel.

“In case you just got back from Mars, we have a little wind in the Four Rivers basin today. It's gusting up to forty miles per hour and, as we feared, the ash isn't staying put. Hal's forecast will be up in just a minute. Visibility on most roads is nonexistent, and all major highways are closed again as of this hour. Except for emergencies, please don't attempt to drive. The airport, which reopened late last night, is closed again.

“Many services and businesses in Four Rivers County are closed for today; we'll list some exceptions later in the broadcast. In nearby Truman and Redfield counties the situation is even more severe. Officials there have requested all employers, except for basic and emergency services, to stay closed, and residents are asked to remain at home if at all possible until further notice.

“Once the wind stops, everyone in our broadcast area is asked to water down ash around your property. If you've already moved ash to your curb, please water that down too. However, residents of Four Rivers are not to wash ash into the storm drains. Now for the weather update, here's Hal.”

“Thanks, Russ, we do have some good news. Winds are expected to decrease by midday to gusts of ten to fifteen miles per hour, decreasing even further this afternoon. By tonight it should be calm, and the front that's passing through will fortunately leave most of its moisture on the west side . . .”

“Fortunately?” Phillip said.

“ . . . chance of showers this afternoon, mostly near the Cascade foothills. Temperatures remain comfortable, mid-seventies today, lower eighties tomorrow—full reports at noon and five thirty. There you have

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it, Russ; decreasing winds and not much chance of any rain adding to the gloom,” he said with the typical false cheerfulness of his profession.

“Maybe we’ll take some of that rain, huh Al?” Russ said.

“Oh, right, heh-heh.”

Heh-heh, what an idiot. Phillip finished making his French toast and ate one piece with peanut butter and jelly. He was nibbling on a plain slice and getting the dishes ready to wash when the phone rang.

Lines are open? It’s Lupe. He picked up the wall phone. “Lo?”

“Hi, Phillip.”

Phillip?—*my God.* “Dad? Are you calling from Chicago?”

“No, left this morning,” Stephen Stark said quietly.

Geez, it’s really him. “Where are you?”

“Des Moines.”

“Iowa?”

“Yes.”

No, Idaho, dummy. Say something. “How’s the trip going so far, Dad?” *Brilliant.*

“Fine. Be there in a couple days.”

“Uh, what kind of car did you rent?” *Chevy.*

“Chevy.”

“Same as yours?” *Dad?*

“Different color. Phillip, can you go and get my car?”

“No problem.” *Talk to him!* “They reopened the airport last night; now it’s closed again—the wind’s blowing ash like crazy.”

“It’s good I got started then.”

“Yeah.” *C’mon, Phillip—maybe the ash bet.* “Uh—” *No, Dad won’t talk about that.* “How’d you get this call through? We still can’t call out.”

“Lucky, I guess. The car’s in J-7, Phillip, right in front; ticket’s in the window. I’ll square with you later.”

“Sure, J-7, I’ll find it.” He jotted the number on one of Stephen’s tidy note pads. *Quick, you’re going to lose him.* “The wind is covering everything I already scraped.”

“Is that right,” Stephen said with no interrogative tone.

“Yeah, the highway’s closed. When they open it, Lupe can ride in with me to get your car.”

“Okay. My spare keys are in the usual place.”

“Right.” *Damn, what else?* “So you talked to her last week?”

“Who? Oh. Yeah, you weren’t home. Phillip, I want to make South Dakota; I should get going.”

No. Think! “Sure, um—”

“Call you tonight when I stop.”

“Okay. Dad?”

“Yes.”

I miss you. “Uh, drive carefully, okay?”

“I will. Bye, son.”

“Bye, Dad.” Phillip hung up. *Son, for God’s sake—why didn’t you talk to him?* Tears welled up in his eyes, and he ripped a paper towel off the dispenser and roughly wiped the moisture from his face. *Shit, stop bawling.* He stared again at the drab scene out front; a final tear slalomed down his cheek.

9

In the street, a car's dim shape crept from left to right in the grey pall; Phillip awoke from his daze. *Where does that fool think he's going? What was I just doing? Thinking about Dad, I guess—pull yourself together.* He put soap in one basin and started to run hot water for the dishes, then turned it off. *Crap, there's no hurry now, do it later.*

Since he couldn't work on the ash, he decided that reading was the only thing he wanted to do. Phillip went to his room and put aside a research paper in favor of one of his old novels, *The Yearling*. He stretched out on his bed and lost himself in the story of Jody, Filag and Fodderwing, protector of injured swamp animals. He got up occasionally to check the wind, but fell asleep in the early afternoon and didn't wake up until the hard-backed book *thunked* onto the floor. He picked it up, placed his marker and looked over at the clock.

It's after two; I don't hear any wind. So get to work. He put on his hat, hurried to the bathroom and tried to urinate quickly, but his stream seemed endless. He finished, then rushed back to open the curtains and check the yard. The wind had completely died down, and the deep volcanic powder was rippled with small-scale ash dunes. A forlorn-looking junco landed on the empty birdfeeder, its tiny black hood poking futilely for seeds.

Don't forget to feed them. He went right out to the hall, opened the front door and saw Gil Beck leaning into a push broom at the property line. Phillip looked at the accumulation on his own front walks.

A couple inches at most, could be worse—get going. He closed the door, searched for his shoes and spotted new wisps of ash on the hallway carpet. *It's creeping in everywhere. Your shoes are in the kitchen—and how did that happen, jerk? See if he came back.* Starting up the hallway to check for Ali, Phillip heard the phone.

It's her. No time for lunch, Lupe—gotta work. Just tell her the roads are bad, to wait a couple days. Phillip was almost at a full run when he entered the kitchen. To keep from falling, he extended his arms like a skater and skimmed halfway across the floor. Girding himself to be firm, he answered the phone and looked out. Only a ghost of the jellyfish survived in the yard, its long legs rounded into four gently rolling furrows in the ash.

“Klaatu barada nikto,” said a contrived deep voice on the line trying to be the alien in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

All right, it's Warren. “Where are you, Big Turd?” His parody of *Big Bird* was a vestige of their schooldays repartee.

“Ya' little shit, how'd you know it was me?” A P.A. system blared in the background.

“C'mon, Warren.”

“Phil, I figured out the other day why you always used to pass me the ball.”

“I'm sure you did.” He smiled and waited for the barb.

“It's obvious. I was the only one you could even see through all those knees and asses way down there.”

“No, I was shooting—thought you were the pole.” Phillip heard the P.A. again. “Where *are* you calling from?”

“Four Rivers airport no less.”

“You are? It's open again?” He gaped at the street as if it might yield some sort of information about travel conditions.

“First plane in today.”

GREY PINE



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“This is great—you need me to come get you?”

“No, Dad’s here. We’re waiting for the road to open, enjoying some fine cuisine—*Le bou-terre-fin-guerre.*”

I’m, Butterfinger. “So you’re here to help them dig out?”

“Yeah, took a week’s vacation.”

Phillip checked the grey sky. “What was it like up there?”

“We got a peek at Saint Helens; what a rush. It’s still spitting; never saw a mountain with its whole top gone.”

“Must’ve been something. What’s it like on this side?”

“Hairy, like flying in fog. Man, this whole deal is wild; a week might not be enough. Dad still has more grass than a golf course and he said it’s all a half foot under.”

“Same here; I’ll be lucky to get it cleaned up before I take off.”

“Your project is still on?”

“I hope so. The ash fall didn’t go straight north.”

“Good deal. So tell me about when it hit there; my parents didn’t even go outside.”

Phillip described the clouds and his other experiences. Warren was duly amazed until he heard about Mick.

"That figures, Phil," he said. "Don't let that ol' wino bother you."

"Yeah, no skin off his nose." Phillip briefly told about the workers Mick brought in, and then he enthusiastically recounted his all-nighter with the street crew.

"So, except for Mick, you're having big fun with all this," Warren said with a laugh then paused. "Phil, Dad sold his big tractor—no luck renting one. Any ideas?"

"Wheelbarrows and shovels—afraid the fun's over."

"Guess I'll need to hire a couple guys, too."

"I'll be over when the road opens; no charge." *And what about Stephen?*

"No way; you've got your own mess."

Stephen can wait. "You can't keep me away, Big Turd." He peered out the window in search of his scraping tools.

"I said we'll handle it, ya' little shit."

"Man, it's good to hear your bossy voice."

"Now don't start queering on me. Wait, I forgot, *el navidad usted muy amigos con la señorita y el magnifico chi-chis.*" The butchered Spanish was further exaggerated by his rising inflections.

"That's bad, even for you." He jumped back on the sink.

"Oh, was I uncouth?" Warren said with feigned remorse.

"Yes, as usual. So what about you two? Hatching any kids?"

"Still thinking about it; we might wait for my first million."

"You'll be rolling in it," Phillip agreed without sarcasm. A draftee during Vietnam, Warren was an Army electronics whiz before going to college on the G.I. Bill to study business and computers. In just a few years he worked his way into administration for one of the new computer companies near Seattle.

"It's bigger than you think, Phil. When every science dork on earth has a computer, I'll be curious to see if you get on board."

"I will when they're more than a pain in the ass."

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“Your enthusiasm overwhelms me. The time is here, my friend.”

Phillip was watching another car escape the development at a slug’s pace. *We might need the fire hose again.*

“Phil?”

“Yeah. So how’s Marilyn?”

“She’s fine; happy about finishing her degree next year. You haven’t told me if you’re still seeing Sophia Loren.”

“Sophia’s Italian, Bozo. Yeah, I’m still seeing her.”

“Well, right arm and farm house,” Warren said in their old sardonic version of *right on* and *far out*. “So, it’s going okay, then?”

Phillip watched the car inch up to the corner to make the turn, a rolling cloud of ash behind. “We’re doing all right.”

“Doesn’t sound like it. You’re knocking on thirty my man; settling down does have plus sides, ya’ know. *La chica es bonita*; but I think maybe she’s *mucho* for you.”

“Ha, ha. She’s not into her looks at all; she’d rather be in old riding duds than a dress. She’s a good person, intelligent and—”

“Okay, who are you trying to convince? So what’s the problem?”

“Nothing major; sometimes we don’t get each other very well.”

“That’s normal—news flash, pal, nobody ever gets you.”

“Thanks a lot. You always do, somehow.”

“Yeah? I bet you still don’t own a friggin’ watch. So how did you piss her off?”

“I didn’t. She says she supports my project, but between the lines it seems more important to her for us to mess around all summer. I need to call Putman—sick of having it up in the air.”

“Ahhrrrg, I swears to God almighty, I be knowin’ it,” Warren interrupted with his energetic if timeworn version of Long John Silver. “Matey, methinks ye have priorities that be with the wrong sort of pussies.”

“That’s terrible, but I should consider the source.”

“Okay, Mister Wild Kingdom.” Long John was already gone. “So the cat deal is the big touchy subject?”

“No, it’s mostly Stephen. I’ve told her about some of his bad shit, but she doesn’t get it. She wants to know him, try out social worker stuff on him.” *Enough*. “So tell me how your parents are doing.”

“Changing subjects are we? Well, Mom’s a little freaked by the ash and Dad’s too old for all this, but they’re doing fine. What about your dad?”

He doesn’t need more Stephen crap. Phillip stared at a towhee searching for grubs under the ponderosa, performing its backwards jump-dance to scratch away the ash.

“Phil? So what’s going on with him?”

“Same ol’ deal.” *Make it short*. “He’s stuck at a convention in Chicago—plastered, of course. I pissed him off yesterday on the phone.”

“You did? No more rolling with the punches?”

“I let him get to me—shouldn’t have. Today he was sobered up; driving a rental back.”

“Phil, I’ve never stuck my nose in this, but my God, you’ve got your own life. How long can you watch over him?”

I don’t know. “Time to change subjects again.”

“So you’re mad at me for saying that?”

“No, I’m just tired of thinking about him.”

“Okay, so what else is fucked up? We covered your love life, the ash and you-know-who.”

Phillip chuckled at Warren’s summation. “Your duty’s done.”

“Bull, all this crap coming down, you should’ve given me a call. Spit it out. What else?”

Phillip sighed. “I pulled one today that’d make Stephen proud. I got pissed about nothing; threw a shoe at Ali.”

“That’s pretty hard to believe. Did you hit him?”

He looked over to the TV room for the cat. “No.”

“Now *that* I do believe. Look, everybody does something stupid once in a while. You know you didn’t really want to hurt the cat; you couldn’t hit the ocean with a rock, anyway, which is the real reason you always passed me the ball.”

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“Funny, Warren.”

“Listen, Phil, since I’m hiring somebody I should be finished in a couple days, then I’ll give you a hand before I take off.”

“I don’t want you to do that.”

“You offered to come over and you’re the one who’s under all the pressure. Listen, I want to, so live with it.”

“I just want to see you while you’re in town.”

“Fine, when we’re working, if you don’t queer out on me.”

“You’re beyond help.”

“Yeah, at least I’m not bummed. Let’s talk tomorrow.”

“Okay.” *I should have a lot done by then.*

“Take care, ya’ little shit.”

“See you, Big Turd.” He hung up and grimaced toward the ash out front. *Do what you can, then help Warren. If Stephen doesn’t like it, he can damn well hire someone.* Phillip started for the door.

Hang on; make sure she’s not coming. He phoned Sageview, and Mrs. Rosendall said Lupe was trying to call him before she left on a grocery run. Phillip made sure she understood it wouldn’t be safe to travel for at least a day or two. While finishing the conversation, he located his shoes and told Lupe’s mother he would call back later.

He tied his sneakers then checked for Ali in the usual hangouts, but he wasn’t around. Phillip went out to inspect the ponderosa and was glad to find it wasn’t encased like before, so he just shook off the branches and then turned on the sprinkler. He went out back to fill the birdfeeder and start the water there before returning to the front yard.

Phillip finished off the narrow row of ash on the garage and then re-scraped the walks in about an hour and a half. When he started on the driveway, traces of precipitation sprinkled his face.

Farm house—good ol’ rain—add to the gloom my ass. It turned into a steady shower, so he dropped the shovel and ran to turn off the hoses in both yards.

He returned to his shovel and found the wet ash easier to scrape, and there wasn’t much on the driveway since the deep piles on both

sides had served as barriers against the wind. As he finished the task, Phillip watched some people pass by in their cars almost at normal speed, no clouds tumbling behind.

Start under the eaves? No, better take a half hour to join the parade before the ash dries up. Let's see, milk, fruit, bread, and cat food; another sprinkler maybe; and you can check out the highway.

10

Phillip left his tools on an ash mound and went in the house for his wallet and keys, then came back to the garage. Though it hadn't been driven in days, his little pickup started on the first crank of the ignition. He unconsciously buckled his seat belt—one of his mother's few rules, then backed down to the street and drove to the corner. Phillip turned right and tried to follow the cleared lane, but it was obscured by wet ash. He slowly approached the fake rock portal that once had PONDEROSA ESTATES across the top until the sign disappeared one Halloween, never to be replaced.

On the other side of the arch he turned left on the state road, where the ash blow-over was still settled, though the rain was letting up. Between the slow sweeps of his wipers, Phillip made out a peculiar truck coming toward him from the other direction. It was an ordinary farm pickup, but the owner had rigged the tail pipe to go up the side so it was actually venting its exhaust above the cab.

To keep from blowing the ash? Except for the road itself, the countryside hadn't been disturbed since the eruption; the drab sage and tumbleweed seemed to fit right in with the volcanic desolation. Phillip came to an alfalfa field where the bales lay interred in the ash at regular intervals like coffins after a battle.

After a mile of mostly sage and hay, the road notched through the basalt ridge east of town where a few wind-dwarfed, soil-deprived ponderosas looked as if they had been dipped in lead fondue. Phillip turned his head to see the valley, but the town was rendered invisible by a cloak of unsettled soot, regardless of the rain. He drove to the bottom of the steep hill, passed a quilt of ashen pear and apple orchards and came to the city limits sign. It read, W__OME TO POND__OSA—__E ASP__ OF THE NORTHW____—its words and tree logo partially obliterated by splashed mud.

Asp of the north, Snaketown—makes as much sense. Phillip went by some untouched potato and onion fields, thinking they resembled grey rice paddies, then he took the turn into town instead of staying on the road to the junction. As in most of Ponderosa, the first houses he came to varied from shacks to modest cottages to stuccos. He immediately took notice of the bright yellow streamers tied to many of the fences, doors and trees. Wondering why the ribbons stood out so much from the ash-blanketed homes, Phillip theorized that yellow was rarely matched with grey, making the contrast even more striking.

The rain had turned to mist, and most residents were out scraping roofs, walks or driveways; only a few had begun to reclaim their lawns. One man stood on a ladder with a long pole trying to knock ash from the branches of one of the mature elms that lined the block. Phillip turned off his wipers and stopped to watch a skip loader grating over the street, its massive tires mashing out eddies of pallid dust with each turn of the wheels. The loader's scoop dropped a load of ash onto a vacant lot with a dull *thump*, causing a cloud to ascend above the rooftops like the aftermath of a bomb blast. Phillip went on to the intersection and circumnavigated a pile of ash that was taller than the street signs.

He came to a block of venerable houses dating back more than a century, two of them with lofty old ponderosas in their yards. Phillip gawked at a three-story "mansion" with six-inch layers of undisturbed ash on every horizontal surface. Though the home looked somber, it

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reminded him of a holiday gingerbread house waiting for its perfection to be violated.

God, where are they going to put all of it? He drove slowly around more ash mountains and passed the city park near a cluster of three tall Protestant steeples and a small Catholic church. Across from Saint Inés, a corner grocery's windows were soaped with prices for *limón*, *cilantro* and three things Phillip never heard of: *chorizo*, *tripas* and *jícama*. The small market was shut tight, and ash had drifted all the way up to the mail slot in the front door.

He manipulated his way through busy neighborhoods onto Pine Avenue in downtown Ponderosa, only three blocks long but the hub of civic activity with the post office, city hall, and fire station. Like the handful of other drivers on the street, Phillip rolled by in low gear. Only the drug store, the hardware, and some government offices were open, their sidewalks cleared of residue. Other businesses like the taverns, the feed & seed and the barbershop were closed, as was the Sunshine Café, its gingham-draped windows dark and glowering behind a deep barricade of ash.

At the end of downtown Phillip passed by the defunct Ponderosa School, a square brick two-story, now the "Red Cross Disaster Relief Center," where numerous cars and trucks were coming and going. He came to the first of the town's two traffic lights, blinking red in both directions like it was three in the morning. Phillip yielded right-of-way to a station wagon and watched puffs of ash drift behind its tires. *It's drying up fast.*

After that intersection, the town gave way to a mile of orchards and fields up to a retail strip of gas stations, cafés, convenience stores, burger joints, fruit stands, bars, a motel, the fast food chicken place, a bank and the market. They all prospered from the nearby federal highway, flashing their neon semaphores at night to entice travelers from passing by the town. As Phillip drove through, about half the businesses were open but only the convenience stores had a lot of customers.

He approached the second traffic light where Pine Avenue and the U.S. highway met the road Phillip could have stayed on to skirt the town. Cars streamed on and off the highway, ignoring a temporary ROAD CLOSED sign. *They're all chancing it before the ash dries.*

The market was right at the junction, its gaudy red sign, KURT'S, revolving above the jammed parking lot. Phillip passed a long line of vehicles at the main entrance and entered the back driveway. He saw that the lot hadn't been re-scraped but the customers were parking in almost the same spots they would have if the lines were visible. Phillip had to park at the back, about where he was supposed to during his days as a checker at the store.

It isn't this bad on Thanksgiving; must be a zoo in there. He walked across the lot and chuckled when he saw luxury cars and old beaters alike with grey mud up to their door handles. As Phillip headed toward the propped-open automatic doors of Kurt's Western Grocery, ash-dusty patrons hurried by in both directions, except for one man who pushed his cart off to the side.

"You stay here," he said urgently to his son, "I'm going back inside for another limit of bread."

Oh, what fun. Phillip went in and found all three check stands bustling, a long queue winding back from each one. Kurt Senior's usually cheerful and orderly displays were messy and depleted, his bright signage mostly old or missing.

Kurt Junior was at the nearest register, and Phillip walked toward him. Though Kurt played basketball in high school with Phillip and worked with him in the store for years, they were not good friends. After a long divorce and a short career as a car salesman, Kurt had moved back home from Four Rivers to take up his father's long-standing offer of partnership in the store.

Phillip walked behind the check stand as if he still worked there. The shiny toes of high-heeled cowboy boots stuck out below Kurt's green grocer's apron. Phillip believed he wore the boots all the time to compensate for his wiry five-foot-five frame. Kurt was also losing the

latest battle in his perpetual war against acne. Constellations of inflamed red zits pulsed from the bridge of his nose up to his scalp, vanishing into greasy light-brown hair that some barber had chopped into a fifty's-era butch.

"Anything left in this place?" Phillip asked.

"What's up, Phil," Kurt said, not really asking, his overbite accentuating the perpetual *I-don't-get-it* look on his face. Though raised in the Northwest, he had developed a twang to his voice that sounded something like his favorite country music. "Ya' fell into the volcano, I guess," Kurt tried to joke.

What? Phillip looked down at his mud-caked sneakers. "Yeah, dirty stuff," he said, striking the front of his flannel shirt with his palm. Ash plumed into the air and some mud crust flaked onto the counter.

"Horseshit," Kurt mumbled, his usual response to any annoyance, but only Phillip detected the oath. Kurt wiped up the grime and returned to his groceries. "If we had another register, I'd hire you double pay right now."

Not for a million. "This is wild; any milk left?"

"Ain't seen any come through in a while. We put limits on everythin' fresh; should be some powdered, same ol' place."

"Thanks," Phillip said as Kurt whipped out and snapped a paper sack. Where there were usually dozens of grocery carts, Phillip found three entangled ones. Instead of dealing with that, he grabbed two hand-carry baskets and headed down a crowded aisle to some cardboard cases on the floor below a scrawled sign: LIMIT 2 BOX POWDRD MILK. A slouched elderly man was placing his two rations into a cart.

". . . drink this dog piss. Son of a bitch," the old man muttered and then glared at Phillip for some imaginary transgression.

"Excuse me," Phillip said as he reached for two boxes of milk. The man gave him another dirty look then shuffled away.

Jesus, like I drank all the real milk. He put one box in each basket and came to an upright freezer, but a lady's cart blocked the aisle as she held the door open to choose some meat. She was short and grand-

motherly, her florid housedress boasting a corsage of yellow ribbons and tiny U.S. flags.

A man about Phillip's age stood behind her, jangling car keys nervously into the side of his leg. He was a foot taller than the lady, clean-shaven, with perfect blond hair; but his dress slacks, shirt, and expensive oxfords were splattered with grey mud. The man tilted back his brand-new flat-billed red baseball hat with a smudged advertisement for MUTUAL FARM on the front.

Mutual Farm is pissed—at her, at everything.

"Make up your mind, will you?" the insurance agent practically yelled, but the lady continued to ponder the frozen meat as if he didn't exist. "For God's sake," the man finally said and then leaned right in front of her to grab a package.

"I was about to choose that," she stated, impassive.

"Not sometime today you weren't," he answered, and hurried away. Not missing a beat, the lady went back to studying her remaining options.

Didn't even happen; she just wants her damn meat. He turned sideways and made his way past her cart to the cooler across the aisle to pick up a package of hot dogs. Then, dodging around shoppers and displays, he made it to the pet food section and gathered more cans than usual of Ali's favorite tuna. A tall, thin woman in her thirties looked up from deciphering scrawls on a long list and firmly poked Phillip's arm.

"Where'd you get those?" She eyed his baskets through thick glasses and pointed at them.

"Cat food?"

"No," she said, flustered, "the powdered milk."

"Aisle six." Reverting to his checker days, Phillip forced a smile and raised his arm in the right direction.

"We'd better get some right now," she informed her groceries as if they were shopping partners. The woman lugged a forty-pound sack of dog food onto her loaded cart then abandoned the stockpile, scurrying past clumps of shoppers. At the end of the aisle she stopped and faced Phillip, suspicion on her face.

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No, lady, I'm not after your damn stuff. She took a quick gander at the others nearby and then disappeared around a stack of toilet paper. *What's with these people? Get it over with.*

Phillip moved efficiently around the familiar market, avoiding people as if they carried plague instead of provisions. He quickly added bread, tortilla chips and bean dip to his baskets, and then a can of green beans and some spaghetti sauce. Finding no palatable fruit in the produce section, Phillip backtracked for some canned peaches and grapefruit and decided to stock up on a jar of his favorite peanut butter. In the small hardware section he found that all the sprinklers had been sold.

At the magazine rack, he took the next-to-the-last newspaper, a day-old Four Rivers Tribune with the headline: DIGGING OUT. Finally, he grabbed a half-case of cola and two candy bars, then stood at the end of Kurt Junior's long line, knowing it would be the fastest. Everyone nearby had at least one full cart; he nodded to a neighbor from Ponderosa Estates then to a bus driver from school, and noticed that people were now mostly smiling and chatting.

God, it's relief; everyone nailed their precious groceries; now they can be civil. Two fortyish women in plain summer dresses carried on a private conversation intended to hold court for anyone within earshot. He put down his full baskets and tried to read the newspaper.

“. . . and I see you mainly have limit items,” one lady was saying in full voice. Phillip thought she sneered with superiority toward his puny selection of groceries.

The queen of all shoppingdom has a serious nose problem. God, let me out of here.

“I don't need the packaged goods,” the other one said. “Our church believes in being prepared; my basement is well stocked, but as far as the fresh items, I don't think these limits are fair to regular customers.”

“Precisely. Their prices are bad enough; always going up, and most of *these* people get their groceries in Four Rivers. After all, this store makes its profit from us, and we shouldn't be penalized at a time when”

Jesus, shut the hell up. He turned his back to them and faced a very large woman draped in a flowered purple and yellow moo-moo. A dour expression on her face, she leaned over her hoard of commodities for physical support, giving the impression that she was permanently attached to the cart.

Phillip pushed his baskets forward with one foot and saw some sequined sandals moving by, snapping with each footfall. They belonged to a tall, bony middle-aged woman in a pea-green sleeveless blouse, and white culottes cinched to the last belt hole. Sunglasses peered like outsized cat's eyes from her beehive hairdo held together with a lime-colored mesh scarf. She spotted the heavy woman and halted her brimming cart. Phillip could smell some kind of fruity lotion the new arrival had basted over her taut, well-cooked skin.

Great, now the swimming pool Goddess. With the other two women yapping right behind, Phillip had no recourse but to face the new conversation.

"Lee Ann, you bought half the store," the gaunt lady commented with an affected, cocky smile.

"Didn't do so bad yourself," the moo-moo woman said back.

"This is it, you know. This is the beginning of the tribulations; He is coming. I hope you've been saved, dear."

"Tell you what, Judith, ask him to bring along the biggest damn vacuum cleaner he's got."

"You mustn't talk like that, or you will be left behind."

"Won't be the first time," she said, and the evangelist wheeled her cart away.

Right arm, two points for the moo-moo. Phillip smiled at her briefly then turned to nudge his baskets ahead. He agonized in line for another fifteen minutes.

"Phil, ya' made it." Kurt's fingers whizzed over the keys as Phillip's purchases finally took their ride down the conveyor belt.

"Man, what a zoo." Phillip made brief eye contact with Kurt Senior at the far register; they exchanged cursory waves. "Doesn't seem to bother you much," he said to Kurt.

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“All the way to the bank.” He shoved a straying can to the box boy.

Good ol’ curt-Kurt. Phillip mused over Warren’s high school nickname for Kurt, who ignored it back then for weeks until some kid explained that it was more than an annoying repetition of his name.

“Still don’t like it in here, do ya’, Phil,” Kurt said, not expecting nor looking up for an answer.

What was your first clue? Phillip just watched the hectic scene, observing that all the employees had tiny yellow ribbons pinned to their nametags. *Senior’s idea.*

“You can get two a’ these,” Kurt told him, holding up the loaf of bread.

“One’ll do it.”

“Not stockin’ up much for another wind,” he said, processing the hot dogs. “Ya’ see the frozen beef that come in before the volcano?” he asked, sacking the last of the purchases because his helper left for a larger order.

“Yeah.” *Saw two idiots fighting over it.*

“Nothin’ like a thick rare steak.”

Yum, with lots of blood.

“Looks like you could use one,” Kurt said. “Nineteen forty-five.”

Another damn health expert. Kurt was glaring at him. “Oh, yeah, hang on.” Phillip pinched two tens out of his wallet; Kurt took the bills and fingered change from the tray.

“Four bits and a nickel is twenty.” He handed over the coins, moved closer and lowered his voice. “Ya’ still seein’ her?” Kurt pretended to write busily on a pad as he spoke.

“I guess you forgot what I told you,” Phillip said. Because of Kurt’s gossiping to Stephen, Phillip had already told him that Lupe was none of his business.

“Horseshit—I’m on your side,” he mumbled behind his hand, checking for eavesdroppers. “Just tryin’ to tell you some of the ol’ biddies are talkin’ ’bout you an’ her.”

His mom’s little bridge club. “What a surprise.”

“Don’t matter to *me* none she’s a beaner.” His last words were barely audible as he figured fake numbers on the paper.

What a guy. “That’s real good, Kurt.”

“All I know is, she’s fine,” he whispered with a lascivious sneer that transformed right away into a patronizing smile for the lady in the moo-moo. Kurt began checking through her items. “So take it easy, Phil, maybe we’ll double some time.”

When pigs fly. “See ya’, Kurt.” Phillip lifted his two sacks and maneuvered around people like an adroit halfback eluding tacklers, finally passing through the doors into the first row of the parking lot.

“Free!” he said out loud, and the old man who was angry about the milk gave Phillip a disparaging glance from behind the trunk of a huge Lincoln. *Screw you; enjoy your powdered milk.* On the way back to his spot, Phillip intentionally scuffed the thin crust on the ground and watched ash rise and surround his shoe. *Like it didn’t even rain.*

He put a couple items in the Styrofoam cooler in back, carrying the rest up to the seat. Phillip started the motor and exited the crowded parking lot, but traffic was sending ash into the air again and he could barely see the vehicles right in front of him. After he made his pickup creep all the way to the junction, Phillip switched on the headlights though it was hours before dark.

Doesn’t help much. Turning onto the state road, he looked into his rearview mirror at what should have been the outskirts of town, but he only saw his grey wake. Visibility began to improve ahead and there were no cars, so he shifted into fourth gear at about forty miles per hour. Before he started up onto the plateau, a pickup and its dense cloud of ash came toward him. Phillip tapped the brakes, closed his window and then downshifted as they met, the soot from the other truck rolling over his windshield like dry steam.

Where in hell is the road? He was all the way down to first gear when it cleared enough to see the highway, but he maintained a very slow speed as he started up the hill. *Damn guardrail—don’t stop or you’ll get rear-ended.* Phillip made it up onto the mesa and wanted to

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cover as much ground as possible before another vehicle could approach. He shifted through the gears up to forty again and could see about a hundred feet ahead.

In a couple of minutes he passed a field of alfalfa caskets and anticipated the sighting of Ponderosa Estates when a sedan materialized from the cloud behind. Phillip looked through his left-side window and caught a glimpse of a vanity license plate, XTOPCAD, as the car pulled even to pass.

You crazy son of a bitch. Phillip removed his foot from the accelerator so the white Cadillac could get by, and then the pickup was completely enveloped by the ash cloud.

Damn, can't see again. He downshifted all the way to first; the transmission whined with the strain, and Phillip slowed to a crawl, but he felt the truck going downhill. *Shit, I'm off!* Instead of turning back up onto the steep crown, he made a quick decision to brake softly and let it roll into the ditch. The pickup settled against a telephone pole, which wasn't visible until seconds after the soft collision. He rolled down the window and stuck out his head to see if he could hear the other driver stop.

Bastard's gone. Reverse; try reverse. The rear-wheel drive truck slipped back an inch or two; then settled forward. He revved the motor and tried again. "Shit!" he yelled, and then shut off the ignition. Phillip sat for a moment; all he could see was the hood and the black pole. *I'll be goddamned.* The door, blocked by the embankment, only opened a few inches. He unbuckled his seat belt, squeezed through the narrow space and plowed his way in back to size up the situation. The pickup was settled at about a forty-degree angle, the right side of the frame high-centered into a three-foot bank of ash scrapings. The air cleared some more, and he looked at his tire tracks coming down from the road.

If you cranked the wheel, that would've rolled it, you did one thing right. Don't forget that asshole's plate—XTOPCAD. He reorganized the two bags of groceries into even weights, locked the truck, and then waded through ash up to the crown of the road and started home. When an occasional vehicle came by, Phillip had to leave the highway

and wait for the ash-fog to dissipate. One guy going his way stopped to offer a lift, causing the thickest cloud of all.

It's probably somebody from Kurt's. Enough psychos for one day—it's not far. He refused the ride, shouting his thanks through the murk toward a silhouette of the Samaritan's car, and then climbed up to the road again. What should have been a ten-minute walk to the house became a half-hour trek of stops and starts.

At home, Phillip didn't remove his filthy tennis shoes, hurrying instead to the kitchen to release the groceries from his fatiguing arms. He called several towing services without success until Parnell's Garage in Ponderosa finally called back to put him on a priority list for the next morning. Even that, Mrs. Parnell told him, depended on the wind.

It was nearly seven by the time he finished with the calls, the unnatural early darkness already closing in. *This day's shot, thanks to that bastard. You could report him. Sure, Mister XTOPCAD probably owns city hall. May as well start on the house.*

Phillip started gathering trash, checking around for signs of Ali as he worked. Out in the garage he carelessly stuffed some paper into the garbage can and slit his finger. "Damn," he said, and walked back to the kitchen, sucking on the cut. He ran cold water on the small wound and applied pressure until the bleeding stopped.

When's the last time you ate? Not really hungry. He opened some beans anyway and was stirring them when the phone rang. *Don't feel like talking, not even to her.* "Hello," he said, thinking he did a fair job of not sounding brusque.

"What's with you?" Stephen asked in a composed tone.

"Nothing, where are you?" *And how wasted?*

"South Dakota. Still looks like goddamn Iowa to me." A television blabbed in the background.

Beer joint. "You got pretty far. Where you staying?"

"Motel. Expected to see Indians by now. My friend Al here says not until tomorrow."

Hang on, Al; he's only two sheets to the wind.

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"You clean up in there yet?"

Got started. "Yeah," Phillip said.

"I bet. You get my car?"

"No, the highway's still closed."

"Get it tomorrow, then."

"If I can." He stirred his beans, turning down the heat.

"It's six damn bucks a day."

"Well, maybe the State Patrol will open up just for me."

"Don't be a wise-ass." His voice was still subdued, not as sharp as his words.

Wait till he hears this. "I have to get my truck first."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's in a ditch. I was lucky I didn't roll it; this guy passed me in—"

"Leave it to you; I thought the roads were closed."

"It rained just enough to get to town for food."

"Jesus. So you went in for some junk, but you couldn't get my car."

"Wasn't time; you don't know what it's like here." Blood resurfaced on his finger.

"You're breaking my heart."

Go to hell, Stephen. With the phone on his left shoulder, he held his hand under the faucet again.

"So, is that piece of Jap-crap still running?"

Running circles around your Chevy. "It's just stuck. Parnell's going to help me tomorrow if the wind doesn't blow."

"Why tomorrow? No reason he can't take ten minutes to pull you out."

"Are you even listening? I'm lucky to be on his list; not going to argue about it."

"Just see if you can get my damn car tomorrow."

"I'll do what I can." He shut off the water.

"Jesus Christ."

Guess that's not good enough.

When Phillip didn't respond, Stephen spoke again. "I'm a couple days away, I'll make the middle of Montana tomorrow."

Depending on beer stops.

“Are you there, for God’s sake?” Stephen asked, still not overly irritated.

“Yeah.” He switched the beans to simmer.

“So she’s going with you to the airport?”

Surprised he remembers. “I’m not sure.”

“Just don’t let her drive my car.”

“God forbid. How was your little talk with her?”

“You already asked me.”

Remembers that, too. “You didn’t tell me anything.”

“All right, Miss goody two-shoes called about your health. I should’ve said it was none of her business.”

“But you didn’t.” *Dad didn’t.*

“I told her you look like shit.” His tone was matter-of-fact.

Not in those words.

“She’s roping you in. Jesus, will you ever regret it.”

“That’s none of *your* damn business,” he said, his rancor growing. “I’ll make real sure she doesn’t call you again. Let’s just drop it.”

“You brought it up. Just don’t expect me at any kike-beadsnapper wedding,” Stephen said, and then laughed.

“That’s one of the stupidest things you ever said,” Phillip told him, but Stephen just started grumbling aside to the bartender. *What’s he saying? Ordering another one—shit.* “How much more are you going to drink, *Steve?*” He said the name with loathing.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me,” Phillip said, losing control. “Drink any more and you can’t drive. Why don’t you just use your goddamn brains and go to bed?” he shouted.

When Stephen spoke, his voice was muffled, emotionless. “Tell you what, wise-ass, you can just go to hell.” He hung up on Phillip again.

I’ll be a son of a bitch. The phone in his left hand, Phillip furiously swept his other arm across the sink, forcing dirty dishes to tumble into the basin. A stoneware plate and some drinking glasses shattered on the stainless steel.

“Hah! I’ll just leave that for you, goddamn ol’ lush.” He glowered at

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the silent phone and then slammed it twice into the holder, not letting go. On the second blow, the casing burst open and pieces of plastic and metal ricocheted off the floor. The broken apparatus hung by wires and screws from the wall, and Phillip dropped the dead receiver onto the counter.

What a shame, fix the other one, too. He made it to the poolroom in several long strides then lifted the desk phone as if to throw it at Stephen's Korean flag, but he stopped and just switched off the ringer. *There, I'm not able to come to the phone right now.* He walked back to the kitchen sink, sighed deeply, and felt his fury begin to steal away. Though it was nearly dark, he looked toward the ponderosa, but the window caught the kitchen lights and his reflection. *What's with you, Phillip? You just start busting shit up? Maybe you can find the cat and terrorize him some more.*

He noticed fresh blood from a long gash on the back of his wrist, and his finger was bleeding again. Phillip put his lower right arm under the cool tap water, applied pressure with his other hand, and then returned to his airy image in the window.

*There you are, dumb shit; take it easy, it's okay here. Stephen was so calm: **Tell you what, wise-ass, you can just go to hell.** He wasn't even that drunk, so you just piss him off anyway.* Phillip lapsed into a semi-trance and by the time he came to, the ends of his fingers were shriveled like raisins.

Go to bed. He walked sluggishly through the kitchen, then down the hallway to his room and lay down on top of the blankets. *At least I got to talk to him this morning.* Tears came again, but this time they didn't stop until his cheek was cold from the wet pillow. Before ten o'clock, he was asleep.

11

Eleven hours later, Phillip woke up with a sore arm and a mild headache. He checked the spot next to his feet where Ali liked to sleep in the mornings. *Still gone—damn.* When he lifted his arm to sit up, there was dried blood on the blanket where his arm was resting. *What the—* He touched the injury with his other hand. *Lot of blood for a little cut.*

Still drowsy, Phillip dragged his work clothes to the bathroom sink and let them fall to the floor behind. He cleaned and medicated his wrist, taping it with gauze because the wound hadn't clotted well. After dispensing with minimum necessities, he put on his clothes and ambled toward the kitchen, still groggy, looking for Ali. He stopped at the hallway window, pushed the pane to the side and took in the calm morning.

The rain cleaned off my tree; looks good. It'll be there when we're all dead and buried, a hundred and fifty feet tall, unless some dickhead cuts it down. You're wasting time; should've been out there by now.

In the kitchen Phillip grimaced at the sight of the shattered dishes and the demolished telephone. He saw the light on the stove and found his beans; they had simmered all night, turning to a round, brown brick. *Good God, you could've burned the place to the ground.* He picked up the pan and rapped his middle knuckle twice on the hard beans.

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Knock-knock, nobody home. How could you have done all this? Jesus, wait until he sees that phone. He put the pan down, went to the den and called the telephone company, telling them he needed an immediate repair. When the lady found out he still had service on the extension, she reminded him about the ash fall and said it could be weeks before they got to him. He thanked her and hung up.

Story time. Tell him you were screwing around in there with a basketball—wouldn't be the first time; tape a check to what's left of the phone. Not bad—yeah, he'll kill you. Phillip went back up to the kitchen, gathered the telephone innards and put them on a shelf. He cut around the edge of the pan with a dirty chopping knife and pried on the sides of the bean mold until it clunked into the trash. He put two pieces of bread into the toaster and took an ulcer pill with a non-aspirin. After spreading the toast with margarine and jelly, he took a slice with him to munch on while he walked through the house, halfheartedly searching for Ali.

Where is that stinker? He's still pissed; some asshole threw a shoe at him. He came back to the sink and removed the unbroken dishes and the pieces of stoneware and glass. His bandage was loose; he peeked underneath and found a blotch of sticky blood. *Lucky it didn't cut deeper, or on the other side.* He tightened the dressing, looking askance at the glass fragments by the sink. He picked up the largest one, a four-inch craggy shard, and placed it over his radial artery.

They slash it right here. He stared for several seconds. *Stop this crap.* As if he'd been cut again, Phillip dropped the sharp piece of glass into the sink, fracturing it in half. *Enough crazy shit, do the frigging dishes.*

He wiped out the splinters, secured a plastic bag over his cut, then squirted in dish soap and stared at the bubbles foaming out of the hot water. *You've got the house and the truck to handle, and the yards, of course. Don't forget Warren. Shit, and the damn Chevy—it can wait another day; he won't know the difference. Nothing's going to get done if Lupe comes over—just call and explain.*

Phillip shut off the water, dried one hand and left the plastic on the other. He walked down to the poolroom, made the call and looked at the

ridiculous bag on his arm as he listened to the dialing pulse. *Click, click, click, frigging click—be nice, but make sure she’s not coming.* He leaned back against the pool table, eyeing the deep footprints he made in the back yard when he fed the birds. *Probably a week’s digging just right there.*

“¿Bueno?”

“Lupe?”

“It’s Phil,” she told someone, and they burst into giggles.

God. “What’s with the *bueno*?” he asked.

“We’re speaking Spanish while we’re canning. Mom wants me to say *chabacanos*, she says my word is too fancy-shmancy.”

Great. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You helped us pick them the other day. Apricots,” she said, and the two women tittered again. “We’re just being silly. I called you back twice. Were you working outside?”

“Yeah, went to town when it rained—came in late and just got up.”

“They opened the highway; I’m coming on over, okay?”

No. “Lupe, I, uh—” He was going to tell her about his accident, but stopped. “Lupe, the roads are still bad here.”

“I’ll be fine. I made you a beautiful ham.”

“That’s nice of you, but, uh—” *Go on.*

“What?”

“I don’t eat ham.” *Oh good, that’s telling her.*

“Hang on, Phil.” He heard her clunking around, moving away for some privacy. “So you don’t like ham?”

“No, never have.”

“I didn’t know that. Neither does my dad.”

“He’s, uh, kosher?” *Okay, yak a while, then tell her.*

“No, same as you, he doesn’t like it. So what kind of meat *are* you eating, besides hot dogs?”

It’s a damn health test. “Uh, fish sticks; chicken patties, and, uh—” *I get an F.* Phillip leaned onto the pinball machine and propped himself on one elbow.

“That’s horrible,” she said, “and it isn’t good for you.”

GREY PINE

“Yeah, like ham or a bloody steak.”

“They’re okay if you eat them moderately. I have an idea about why you do this. The only meat you eat doesn’t even look like it came from an animal.”

Phillip thought about that for a moment. *It’s probably true.* “You’re right, that’s pretty stupid.”

“What are you saying?”

“If I don’t like meat, then I shouldn’t eat it. Doesn’t matter what it looks like.”

“Do you think you could go that far?”

“Not eat any meat? Easily.”

“Phil, you probably know in Genesis it says man rules over the fish, birds, and all the creatures that move along the ground. But I think it means we’re supposed to look after them more than *rule* them, and no one honors that more than you do. It’s one of the reasons I care about you.”

“Thanks, but I think we’re *all* creatures moving along the ground.” He pulled off the plastic bag and began kneading the tension in his forehead with one hand.

“I guess that’s where we differ a little. I believe God has chosen man to be above animals so we can care for them.”

“I see, so we eat them, make dog food out of horses and exterminate half the wild species. We’re doing one hell of a job.” Phillip heard static for a few moments and brought his hand down from massaging his brow.

“You’re getting upset, please try to relax,” she said.

Relax, my ass. He didn’t respond.

“I shouldn’t have changed the subject. Phil, my point is I don’t think you’re taking care of yourself, especially with your eating.”

“Okay, maybe I’ll quit the goddamn hot dogs,” he said, beginning to lose his temper.

“You know I like a good discussion, Phil, but you’re not even trying to tone it down.”

“C’mon, so I said *damn*.”

“I mean the anger more than the words.”

Enough of this. “Lupe, I don’t think it’ll work out for you to come over today,” he said, and she was silent. *Okay, you said it. Now what?*

“Phil, have you been arguing with your father?”

Shit, how does she know that?

“Phil?”

“Yes, last night on the phone.”

“Where is he?”

“Halfway across South Dakota, if he didn’t stop and get hammered again in some bar.”

“After you two have been arguing, you’re so different.”

Crap. “I’ve told you, I usually just listen to him shoot off his mouth. This time I got mad.”

“This is the third or fourth time in the last month. I can tell; you act like somebody I don’t even know.”

Don’t tell me I do that. “That’s BS, Lupe, this is how I am,” he said, more vehemently than he intended.

“No it isn’t; listen to how you’re talking to me.”

Bullcrap. Now she expects me to apologize.

“Shorty?”

Shorty’s gone to the mountains. He said nothing.

“Well, you’re right, I shouldn’t come over,” she said, almost mumbling. “I’ll talk to you later, Phil.”

Lupe disconnected, and he hung up his phone. *Our first damn fight, you really handled that well. Tough shit. She can’t tell me I’m like him—to hell with both of them.* He looked at the ringer switch to make sure it was still off. *Damn thing can stay off.*

He walked into the TV room and defiantly sat in his father’s recliner then leaned back and turned on the vibrator. *Nice chair, Stephen, but the vibrator feels like crap. I feel like crap.* Phillip turned off the motor and manipulated the lever to sit up. He rocked in the chair and watched his reflection in the blank TV screen. *This is okay. It’s*

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comfortable, real comfortable—just back and forth. He became lost in his vague image for several minutes.

Jesus, snap out of it, get something done. Phillip stood and went over to the kitchen sink and looked up at the innards of the mangled telephone. *How is Putman going to call, idiot? C'mon, do it, call them.* He grabbed his address book, took it to the poolroom and picked up the phone.

What the hell, here goes nothing. He made the call and asked Putman's secretary about the status of the lynx project, but she put him on hold. *Damn, she should know. Maybe that's good. No, that means it's up in the air.* He waited in anguish, debating all possibilities with himself until the lady finally returned. She informed him there had been some reshuffling, but the project was on. She said they hoped to call soon, within a week or two, to confirm everything. They thanked each other and hung up.

"Farm frigging house!" he said, blithe and disengaged from his gloom of a few minutes earlier. *Take care of this joint and you're outta here.* He returned to the kitchen and found his other piece of toast; it was so cold the margarine had congealed. He flung it backhand like a square Frisbee across the room, curving it right into the trashcan.

"Yeah, Stark scores two from the corner." *Stop farting around. Maybe I should turn the ringer back on. No, they won't call for days; you'll get more done without it.* He put the bag back on his hand, finished the dishes in twenty minutes and told himself he would do more cleaning that night.

Phillip got his work gloves and went through the garage for the wheelbarrow and a spade so he could start on the task of removing the accumulation from below the front eaves. The ash there was two to three feet deep from roof scrapings and heavy from the runoff. The front shrubs made for some awkward digging, but he wheeled a load down to the curb and then completed a few more trips before he thought about the time. *Must be eleven, just getting on a roll. Yeah, on a roll, funny man, you have to check on the truck.*

He ran back in to call the wrecker, and Parnell's wife told him they would get to his pickup at about noon. Phillip went back out, carted two more loads, and then set out for the highway, jogging down the cleared sidewalks to the corner and then into the street. Fifteen minutes later, Mister Parnell was hooking a cable from the tow truck to the back of the pickup when Phillip approached, sloughing through knee-deep ash.

Parnell looked up. He was over six feet tall, heavy, but not stretching the buttons of his dirty chinos and red flannel shirt. Below the bill of his oily green cap, his sociable smile was shadowed by several days of spiky black beard.

"So, Stark's boy," Parnell said, "remember you on the state team." That team, regardless of its disparate personalities, was the only one since 1958 to win a game at district playoffs. Though eliminated in the round before "state," their fame endured in Ponderosa. Mister Parnell extended his hand after wiping it on his pants.

"Morning," Phillip said during a quick handshake, and then reexamined the back of his truck.

"Used to play cards with your ol' man at the VFW." Parnell checked the cable as he spoke.

Let me guess, until he pissed you off.

"Haven't seen him in a while." He turned to Phillip. "What's he up to?"

"Nothing new. You think it'll come out of there okay?" he asked, nodding to the buried wheels.

"Slicker 'n snot. Winch 'er out an' tow it, if it ain't runnin'."

"It's running." Phillip reached into his back pocket, accidentally peeling off his homemade bandage.

"Pretty bad cut," Parnell said, looking at the bloody gauze and the gash as Phillip handed over the keys.

"No, my cat just nailed me." He stuffed the mangled dressing into his front pocket.

"Don't look like it."

Another citizen with a nose problem.

GREY PINE

Parnell slogged through the ash in his huge black boots, widening the furrow, so Phillip followed easily to the front of the pickup. “How’d you get ’er down here?” Parnell called back as he inserted the key in the lock.

“Guy in a Cadillac passed me in the middle of an ash cloud—couldn’t see and went off.”

“Don’t surprise me; half this country now is people tryin’ to get nowhere fast.” Parnell opened the door into the embankment then turned around. “Yup, speeders ‘n drunks, my bread and butter.” His expression turned solemn. “I see too much of what they do to other folks. Anyway, you could report this since another car was in on it, but there’s so much goin’ on I doubt they’ll care. Can you get back in there?”

“Yeah, you want the hand brake off?”

“And outta gear.” Parnell handed back the keys.

Phillip squeezed through the narrow opening, rolled down the window and sat in the driver’s seat facing the pole. *Damn thing looks closer, bigger.* After releasing the brake and checking the gear-shift, he noticed a knot circle in the creosote-embalmed tree trunk.

Hard to believe it was growing once. I wonder where?

“Hey, you gonna get out of there?” Parnell shouted.

“What?” *Zoned out—shit.* “Yeah, right now.” He grunted his way back through and stood by the cab. Parnell was resting on the truck bed as if he were in the middle of a backyard gab session.

He probably thinks I’m on drugs. Phillip looked down at his ash-smothered sneakers.

“Looks like you barely touched it,” Parnell said.

“What?” Phillip lifted his head.

“What you was starin’ at, the pole. Ash must’ve slowed you down. You’re lucky; them big poles is like hittin’ solid rock, no give to ’em. Seen plenty of cars take ’em on, even on purpose.”

Jesus. “You mean—”

“Yup, pole like that always does the job. I seen some bad ones,” Parnell added in an open-ended tone.

“That right,” Phillip said more than asked. *You’d have to be pretty screwed up to do that.* He reached into the truck bed for a candy bar he lost the day before and winced when he saw the bloody cut on his wrist again.

“You okay?” Parnell asked.

What? “Sure.” Damn, snap out of it; get him moving.

“Anyway, happens more than you think. I had a real ugly mess just last month. It was over on—”

“So it’s ready to come out?” Phillip interrupted and tossed the candy through the window onto the seat.

“Sure, let’s do ‘er,” Parnell said, raising his brows as if perplexed by his customer’s lack of interest in the gory details.

Parnell had the truck out in a few minutes, and Phillip signed the form and headed off, unwrapping the melted candy. He licked off a bite, left the rest, and drove right home to start working below the eaves of the house. Before he rolled his first load away in the wheelbarrow, a road grader came around the corner.

All right, here comes progress. He watched his piles disappear into the massive blade and become part of a hip-deep ridge at the center of the street. He went back to his own work by the house for another hour and finally stopped for a late lunch. Sitting on the porch with his sandwich and drink, Phillip watched a skip loader and dump truck begin to dispose of the long pile.

Find out where they’re putting it. Taking a shovel, he walked down to the curb and waved to the driver. *God, it’s the disappearing fireman from the other night. He finally gets to be the driver, goody for him.*

“How’re you doing?” Phillip yelled over the engine noise.

“Not bad,” the young man answered from the window, his eyes droopy and tired.

“You were out here with us the other night, right?”

“Yeah, I live here. What is it you want? Burnin’ daylight,” he said and pushed the gearshift into low.

So now he’s the big worker. “Where you putting the ash?”

GREY PINE

“Near town, then they take it to the dump. Gotta go.”

“Will it help if we put it in the middle of the street?”

“Don’t give a damn where you put it,” the driver said. He gunned the engine, looked straight ahead and drove away.

Bye, neighbor. Screw him—back to work. As he walked back up the front path, Phillip surveyed his next daunting project—the ash on the immense front lawn. *That’ll take forever, then there’s the back—good God.* He took a long swig from the tall thermos he’d filled with pop and ice in preparation for the warm afternoon.

Leaving the jug next to his half-eaten sandwich, Phillip plunged into the work again, wheeling load after load to the street. Hardly pausing during the entire afternoon, he finally finished under the eaves as the premature dusk began to descend slowly upon the neighborhood. He started on the lawn and heard the familiar staccato of a custom muffler.

Warren? He looked up from his shoveling to see a VW Beetle approaching from the corner. *You didn’t even call him.* Phillip let go of his shovel as the refurbished black 1956 Volkswagen with the small oval window in back pulled into the driveway. Warren stopped between the pickup and the yard, cut the engine and stayed in the car. Phillip took off his sweaty baseball cap, stepped out of the ash and jogged over to the driveway. Warren had his head bowed, avoiding eye contact.

He wouldn’t be pissed; what’s with him? Hat in hand, Phillip walked through the narrow opening between Warren’s car and the deep embankment of ash at the edge of the lawn.

“Hey,” Phillip said from a couple feet away, “I got so carried away here, I forgot to call—sorry.” Without answering, Warren looked up at him, but his usually animated face was blank and long. Phillip leaned one arm on the roof of the Volkswagen.

“You stuck in there, Big Turd?” he said as he looked in, putting his grimy cap back on. Phillip noticed that Warren’s freckles had thinned and his hair had turned more brown than red, changes that seemed to fit the seriousness on his face.

Geez, the overgrown kid look is gone. “What’s with you?”

“Phil,” Warren said, sighing, his head down again, “why don’t you answer your damn phone?”

“I had the ringer off. What’s wrong?”

“They’ve been trying to call you all afternoon.”

“Doctor Putman? They said a week; how’d they get you?”

“Your sister gave them my name,” Warren said, facing him again. “But it wasn’t any doctor.”

What the hell?

Warren exhaled as if he were winded. “Phil, your dad, there was an accident, someplace in Wyoming.”

“What?”

“He’s dead, Phil; I’m sorry.” Warren lowered his head.

Can’t be. “How?” he asked, bewildered, and sat back into the mound, ash up to his waist. A guide stick from a lilac gored him in the spine, but he was numb to the pain. Warren extended his long neck out the window, a hand on his temple as if he had a headache.

“It’s pretty grim, Phil.”

“Just tell me.” He looked straight ahead.

“He drove head-on into a concrete pylon. The car caught fire; some guy in a camper put it out, but it was way too late. They said he could’ve died on impact; let’s hope so.”

Phillip extracted his hands from the ash, put them on his knees and stared at his dim reflection in the polished door of the car. *There it is, like the TV screen the other day. It’s okay here, back and forth.* He began rocking slightly.

Warren watched him a moment then opened the door, but Phillip’s glassy eyes were fixed straight ahead, where the reflection was. Warren unfolded his long body out of the car.

“Phil?” he said, but Phillip didn’t move. “There were no witnesses; they can’t close the case, so they want to do an autopsy. They’re guessing he just went to sleep.” Warren closed the door; it made the tight click of a perfect fit.

GREY PINE

What's he saying? Asleep? More like passed out. I told him he couldn't drink any more, told him and told him. "Like solid rock, no give to it."

"Huh? Yeah, I guess. Phil?"

"He's seen some bad ones."

"Who?"

"Parnell. His bread and butter—another damn drunk."

"Phil, you can't sit here in this crap. Let's go in."

I told him, Mom, I did, but it was goddamn Stephen.

"Phil?" Warren put a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"The drunken son of a bitch killed my dad."

"What? Who? I told you they think he fell asleep."

He looked up at Warren, shaking his head. "No, no way."

"Okay, let's just go inside." He lifted Phillip's arm, making him get to his feet, ash clinging to his clothes.

"No, I'm staying here. I'm not finished, Warren."

"Jesus, Phil, I'll help you with it tomorrow."

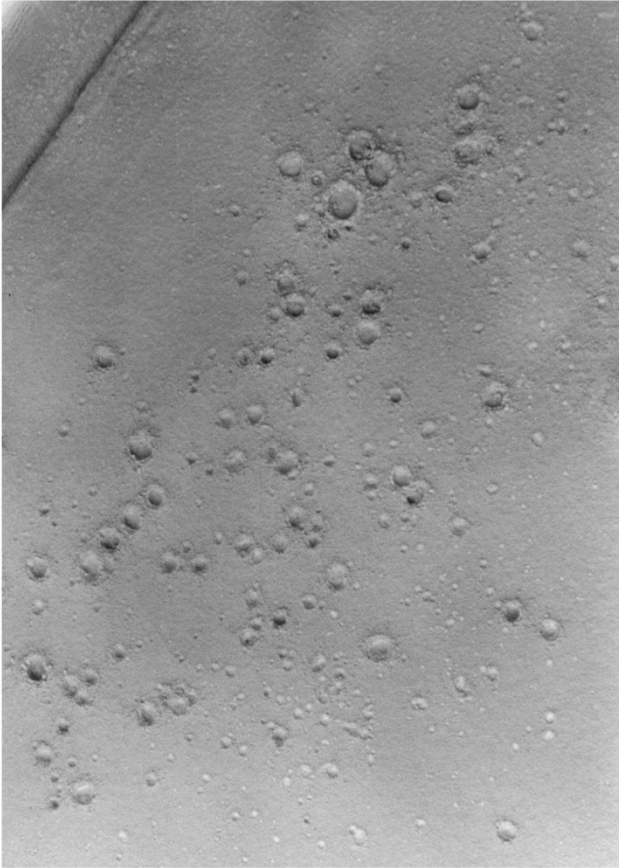
"I'll go in at dark," he said, standing up in the mound.

"All right, whatever you say. Be right back; I have to make a quick call." Warren went in the house.

Phillip sat back down, and a couple of tears dotted the grey powder below.

Stephen finally did him in. I shouldn't have pissed him off; it's my fault. He stared at his reflection in the car door and his body started to sway again. *It's comfortable here.*

T. Lloyd Winetsky



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Part Two

*This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day,
Thou cannot then be false to any man.*

William Shakespeare
Polonius from *Hamlet*

12

Warren sipped from a bottle of premium beer and spoke with Kurt Junior behind a couple other ex-basketball players who were watching Phillip run four straight shots in eightball. Credence Clearwater pulsed from the speakers as Phillip circled the table confidently, slapping the side of his leg to the dependable beat.

Before the wake, Warren had cuffed the sliding doors in the pool-room together with duct tape so no one would unwittingly step out for some evening air into the half foot of ash still in the back yard. Warren and Phillip also moved out the recliners and brought in folding chairs and a long table, now covered with platters of finger food and desserts from Kurt's Western Grocery. Kurt Junior had brought it all in a new panel truck he was supposedly test driving from a car dealer in Four Rivers. A few feet from the food table, Mick Lewis ran the bar from the kitchen behind a name-brand lineup of whiskey, vodka, rum and tequila.

Stephen's funeral had drawn fewer than fifty people, the wake about thirty. Some had already left and the rest were dispersed about the two rooms and the kitchen. Three of the Starks' old friends from Seattle were there, and Phillip received a few flowery condolence cards from people he didn't know who said the ash kept them from coming. Other than Phillip's ex-teammates and two teachers from his school, most of

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the rest of the mourners were from Stephen's warehouse in Four Rivers. The only relatives who showed were Stephen's lone sibling, Aunt May; Ellen Stark's brother and his wife; a couple of cousins; and Phillip's sister, Joann. Not wanting her two children at the funeral, she flew in from Portland alone and was sharing the guest room with their aunt.

Joann was older than Phillip by only a year, and as kids they did some things together and had a relatively peaceful relationship. She never had to deal with Stephen's serious drinking because she married and moved to Portland before her mother's cancer. Joann's husband, a Vietnam veteran who became a policeman after the war, met her in high school when they were both on the track team.

A few years into the marriage, Richard Meyers stopped visiting the Starks with Joann. Phillip despised Meyers, who sometimes boasted of "snuffing slopes" in the war. An inebriated Stephen Stark more than once told Phillip, "That animal your sister married gives a black eye to all veterans." It was a rare point of common ground between them.

Stephen's funeral was the first time Joann had been there in almost two years because of "problems at home." She offered no details until the previous Christmas when she called her brother and revealed that Richard had beaten her. Phillip had long suspected abuse, but he bristled when it was confirmed. She insisted that Richard was fine most of the time and had been under a lot of pressure at work.

Phillip asked what she was going to do about it, and Joann said she would convince Richard to go with her to counseling. She wrote a month later saying things were better, but Phillip wasn't convinced. Though his relationship with Joann had become strained over the years, Phillip felt some obligation to check up on her, but he didn't get around to it before their father's demise.

Stephen's partially burned remains arrived by plane two days before the funeral. His brief will suggested a simple burial, but Joann held out for a church service. Phillip told her he would agree to "the stupid falderal," only if there was a closed casket and no "useless" cosmetic measures for the body. They both resented the compromise, and he stayed away from Joann as much as he could before the funeral.

To his sister's displeasure, Phillip showed up at the last minute for the late-afternoon service in Ponderosa. He entered the small sweltering church alone in rumpled slacks and a coral-red and aquamarine Hawaiian shirt. Phillip sat dutifully in the pew for family and close friends then sulked through the clichés about his father, who was said to be both "spiritually present" and "in a much better place."

The elderly preacher began a rambling homily, saying Stephen's death was like the darkness everyone suffered from the volcano, which in turn was like the gloom of winter, a time when faith keeps people going while they wait for the light of spring. Waiting wasn't good enough, he said, God expects you to long for the light that will return, and so grief for Stephen would eventually pass as well.

Phillip whispered to Warren that the ash fall gave the old guy some new BS for his tired eulogy. "I'm surprised he can plug Stephen's name into the right places," Phillip said loud enough that a few people heard.

Lupe told him to "shush," and after the service she went to the burial and wake with her parents. The Rosendalls paid their respects and left; Phillip was supposed to take Lupe to her apartment later. By the time she arrived at the wake, Phillip had disposed of a beer and two frozen margaritas, and he cheerfully introduced Lupe to the mourners. After that, he got another drink and took on all comers in eightball, not losing a game to any of his old teammates.

Phillip left the table with his cue, saluting toward Warren. "Sergeant Sims, hold the fort for the champ; I seek another margarita and more attractive competition." He found Lupe chatting with Aunt May and invited her to play pool, but Lupe said there was something she had to talk to him about.

"Plenty of time for that; relax a little, like the experts say, whoever they are." Phillip smiled at a nearby couple and took a gulp of his fresh cocktail.

Never having seen him drink, Lupe was concerned but also strangely attracted to his gregarious mood. "Okay," she said, "but then we talk."

Not today, dear girl. "Absolutely; now get comfortable for the game." By the time they walked to the pool table, she had removed her

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black suit coat and was listening to Phillip explain the rules. She tied her long black hair into a ponytail to get it out of the way, then the members of the “state team” who never went to state pretended not to notice when she leaned over for the first shot, opening the top of her shimmering white blouse.

“Hell of a wake, huh?” Warren commented to Kurt, thinking himself clever for referring to the event and Lupe’s cleavage at the same time. They were standing by a wall near one of the stereo speakers; he had to stoop for the bantam grocer to hear him. Warren hadn’t changed from his dark-brown suit with a tiny yellow ribbon pinned to the lapel.

“Hell of a what?” Kurt asked, his eyes fixed on Lupe. He had skipped the funeral to handle the catering and wore a new long-sleeved western shirt and crisp blue jeans with the tall boots. Kurt took a gulp from his third Seven and Seven, a burning cigarette wedged into his fingers.

“Jesus, they call this a wake, Kurt; I said hell of a wake.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he answered, still staring at Phillip’s girlfriend. “Damn, she’s loaded in all the right places,” Kurt said under his breath. “Hurts to look at, part beaner or not.”

“You’re a good example for me, curt-Kurt.”

“Don’t call me that. What’re you blabbin’ about?”

“You’re so racially tolerant,” Warren said, sotto voce.

“Gotta change with the times,” Kurt answered, oblivious to Warren’s sarcasm as he ogled Lupe. “Man, if she wasn’t Phil’s—”

“Sorry to clue you in; she’s way out of your league.”

“Horseshit.” Kurt took a drag of his cigarette and formulated a question. “What’s with Phil, anyway?” he asked, keeping his voice just below ‘Fortunate Son’ thumping from the speakers. Warren nursed a sip of beer before he answered.

“Enlighten me, Kurt.”

“He’s actin’ like she’s his sister.”

“He’s trying to smooth over a little spat they had.”

“A fight?” he said with a light of opportunity in his eyes. “Man, I

wouldn't let her get close to these horny guys, couldn't keep my hands off those—”

“Shut up—Jesus.” Warren's oath halted Kurt's fantasy.

“Horseshit; just said what you was thinkin'. What's your problem, anyway?” After the rhetorical question, Kurt elongated his torso because someone had blocked his view of Lupe. “Ya' know Phil got all that booze in town an' spent more 'n five hundred bucks at the store. Told him he had too much food, but he didn't give a shit. Now look around, there's enough for three times this. He's that flush?” Kurt had to bend back his acne-pocked neck to glance at Warren.

“I don't know, Kurt.” He arched his brow. “It's none of my business.”

“Okay, okay, but you gotta admit he's even weirder than usual.”

“No he isn't, except he doesn't drink like this.”

“Nah, ya' expect that. Mitch tol' me he was lookin' for a goddamn cat before the funeral.”

“His cat's been gone for days.”

“So?” He lowered his voice. “It's a fuckin' cat. He's walkin' around here like it's a birthday party—look at that stupid Hawaiian shirt.” Kurt downed his drink, took another smoke and redirected himself for another eyeful of Lupe.

“You'd be a little bit strange if your dad kicked off.”

“Yeah, not like him.” He reached down to flick his cigarette in the general direction of one of Stephen's glass ashtrays on the floor. His muddled attempt resulted in the ash falling onto the rough green carpet. “I'm surprised he's lettin' me smoke—such a asshole about that. Remember we'd call him Panther pussy?” he asked with a muffled laugh.

“No, just you and Fike.”

“Horseshit. How come you didn't invite Fike?”

“Don't be stupid—not even if he *wasn't* in jail.”

“He's out now. That's not my point, anyway.”

“You don't have a point; you don't know Phil.”

GREY PINE

"Hell I don't." He finally maintained eye contact with Warren.

"Ya' know what he'd do at the store? There'd be a mouse or a big ol' spider; he wouldn't kill it, just catch it and throw it outside—crazy, or maybe just chicken shit. When we'd get a snake out back, he'd take it away before I could get the sumbitch with Dad's machete."

"Tell me this, Kurt, does it take more balls to catch a snake or to chop it in half?"

Kurt looked dumbfounded for a moment. "Horseshit; you an' your smart-ass questions." He turned toward the game.

"You've been in that damn store too long." Before Kurt could answer, derisive laughter passed among the onlookers as Phillip shot in the eight ball.

"See, Lupe, I told you this was easy," he said toward the pocket that swallowed the black sphere. Phillip smirked as he put his cue on the rack.

"You mean it's over? I won?" she asked, not playing innocent, just not very familiar with the game.

"That's right. You took the table from me." *Nice shot—she's happy, and later for her little talk.* "So who's sober enough to play the lovely winner?"

When Phillip offered the spot, Kurt snuffed the cigarette into his palm and dropped it toward the ashtray. He dodged his way around another potential volunteer to eagerly select a cue from the rack.

"Easy, curt-Kurt," Phillip said, and everyone chuckled.

"Time to show the lady how this is done right," Kurt said, gathering the billiard balls. "We could sure use some country-western, though."

Phillip smiled. "Nope, Credence is stacked up in there."

Kurt grumbled as he put the balls in the triangle. "At least it ain't disco horseshit," he said. Lupe raised her dark eyebrows in mild disgust as she lined up the shot to start the game.

"That's good, Kurt, she loves the subject of horses," Phillip said with a laugh, and Lupe rolled her eyes good-naturedly. Empty glass in

hand, Phillip grinned as he walked from the den to the bar, his dark-blond hair tousled and his fair beard beginning to show after days of inattention.

“Look at all the munchies and booze,” he said, almost blustering. “C’mon folks, Stephen wouldn’t want anybody to leave here sober or hungry. And feel free to dance, plenty of room at *this* funeral.” His jeering comment caused people to stop their conversations and look at him, a few with disapproval, most just smiling uncomfortably.

“Another one, kid?” Mick Lewis said to Phillip, and the guests resumed their chatter. Mick had changed from his suit into khakis and a tight yellow polo shirt, accentuating both his brawny shoulders and protruding girth. Lewis’s dyed black hair wreathed his bald crown, and barbed whiskers jutted from his five o’clock shadow. Earlier in the evening, Phillip was repulsed by an up close view of Mick’s nose, mouth and ears, all asymmetrically puny for his large skull.

“Kid? Talking to me, Mick?” *The Prick*. “Yup, pour me another one.” Lewis had already started a new batch, and Phillip put his wide-brimmed glass on the counter as the blender whirred to a halt.

“Comin’ like a two-peckered rabbit,” Mick said blandly. Two nearby women overheard the figurative language and stopped their discussion to glare at him. Indifferent to their daggers, he lifted the pitcher and poured the frothy concoction into Phillip’s glass. “What happened to Steve’s big gook flag? I expect he’d want me to have it.”

No chance. “He gave it to the V.F.W.” *Not bad, Phillip.*

“You don’t say. So tell me how you got all the ash off your lawn; hire a bunch of—”

Before Mick could provide a race of laborers, Phillip interrupted. “No, just Warren and me,” he said, leaving out that Warren had borrowed a small tractor to help finish off the front yard. Mick slid the drink across the bar.

“Thanks, neighbor,” Phillip said sarcastically, then lifted his glass and turned toward the group. “I’o neighborliness!” he toasted above the din of Credence Clearwater, and nearly everyone turned toward him.

GREY PINE

Several people raised their glasses, only a few repeating Phillip's words. Most of the guests took a drink and tried to go back to their conversations.

Hell, you can do better than that. He began to raise his glass again but Joann was there, holding his arm. He glared at his sister; she let go of his arm and moved in front of him. Nearly the same height as Phillip, Joann stared straight at him like she did when they were teens, knowing full well he was touchy about being face to face with anyone.

"Phillip, people are talking." Her muffled voice was cross, but she smiled toward the guests. He took another gulp of his drink, lowered the glass and had no choice but to look right at her. Their mother used to call Joann "my pretty Scandinavian," but now the veins around her blue irises intertwined like red highways on a road map, and her stiff blonde pageboy wasn't long enough to cover the beginnings of droopy skin below her jowls.

Phillip noticed her fastidious navy-blue suit coat was too tight and that her hips bulged in the skirt. *Joann the jock—presto, the sagging housewife.* He finally answered her: "Shit, this is a party, of course they're talking."

"They're talking about *you*," she said, quiet but firm, her straight teeth clenched. Phillip saw that she had powdered the circles around her eyes and a scar on her cheek.

The bastard really nailed her. "I don't care what they're saying. Maybe you could give me some breathing room." As she moved away, he said, "What's that under your eye?"

Joann kept her voice low. "I hurt myself; it's nothing."

Bull. He let her tug him over to an unoccupied corner.

"Phillip, you could've at least worn a tie to the service."

"Stephen never wore one, so in honor of the deceased, no tie; it'd look dumb with this shirt, anyway," he said, intentionally boisterous.

"Sh, not so loud." She looked around to make sure no one was watching them.

Phillip lowered his voice to a false whisper. "He always said, 'What's the point of a fucking tie? Doesn't hold anything up.'" Then,

louder and with a laugh he added, "That's one thing Stephen was right about, by God."

"Hush, Phillip," she demanded softly, "Daddy wouldn't use that kind of language."

"I said *Stephen*. Nice talking to you, Joann." He turned and took the first step to walk away, but she grabbed his arm.

"Phillip, I need t-to, uh—" She paused with a sigh. "I need to discuss something, but you keep avoiding me."

"Avoiding you? It took a funeral to get you here."

"That's a terrible thing to say. I just want to talk."

"You too? How about a game of eightball?" he said, laughing.

"What?"

Get it over with. "Forget it. Go ahead, talk."

"We need more privacy. Let's go in the parlor."

"Nope, one mausoleum a day is enough."

"Where, then?"

Crap, what does she want? "Out there." He nodded to the back door; they crossed the TV room and entered the garage. Phillip turned on the lights, put one foot on the pickup's rear bumper and began to polish off his drink. She stood next to the driver's side door, fidgeting with the hanky in her breast pocket.

"This is lovely," she said, then put on a condescending smile. "You look thin, Philly."

You look fat, Joann. "Try Phillip, I'm a big boy now."

"I've always called you that. All right, I don't want to fight with you." She moved away from the truck and faced him from below their father's oil-changing shelf. Like soldiers at attention, a dozen plastic quarts of oil lined the wall behind four boxed filters, a tin funnel, and a stainless steel catch basin that shone like a kitchen utensil.

"Nice and quiet out here, huh, Joann? And neat as a fucking pin, just like Stephen left it," he said, placing the glass precariously on the corner of the truck's rail.

"I don't remember you swearing so much; or the drinking."

"Well, little Philly can swear all he wants and drink all he wants,

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just like drunken ol' Steve." Hands in the front pockets of his slacks, he leaned back on the truck bed.

"Phillip, my God, how can you say such a thing?"

"Still having trouble with reality, Joann? How do you think he died?"

"It was an accident, of course."

"Bingo, I knew it. All they had to do was smell his mouth; they're just being considerate until this is over. Your *Daddy* died a long time ago, except for a few brief miraculous resurrections."

"What does that mean?"

"It means Stephen the booze hound finally killed both of them." *With my help.* "That's who this party's for."

"It's a wake; and I won't listen to you talk crazy about him like that," she said in her toughest big sister voice.

"Fair enough; next subject." Still against the truck, he brought his hands up and folded his arms.

"You criticize him, and look how drunk you are."

"Well, like father like son, except he couldn't stop."

"You're exaggerating." She turned away for a moment.

"And how would you know? What about you, Joann? What are you strung out on?"

"Nothing." Her shoulders drooped and she stared at the concrete floor. "I just have my stress pills."

"Sure. So, are we finished now?"

"No," she said, standing straight to regenerate her script as the levelheaded sister. "It's nice to see Aunt May." She smiled, trying to ease the tension. "Where's my elephant?"

With a reluctant grin, he pointed past her. "It's in the shop."

Their aunt could pen a Sunday crossword and in her next thought send a two-foot unpainted porcelain pachyderm for Joann's birthday and have no idea it was a white elephant in more ways than one. Before May's visits it was a tradition to ensconce the tacky gift from its regular duty as a doorstep.

“She appreciates how nice you’ve been to her, Phillip.”

“You sound surprised. I always get along with her.”

“I know that, don’t be so defensive.”

“Get to the point, Joann. What is it you want?”

“All right.” She sighed heavily. “I’d like to know about the settlement.”

Phillip stopped leaning on the truck and put one hand on the back rail. “Now the important stuff,” he said.

“That’s not fair.”

“So what do you want from me? You’ll get it all from the lawyer.”

“Do you know anything about the insurance?”

“Jesus, I don’t know and don’t care.”

“If Richard leaves me, I’m worried about supporting my kids.”

“It’s that bad, huh?” he asked, not sounding concerned. “And you expect me to believe the bastard didn’t do that to you?” He moved toward her, pointing at her face.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Phillip shook his head in disgust and reached up to the quarts of oil and pushed them out of perfect formation.

“I don’t want to be crass; this is about my kids.”

Back off, Phillip, that’s probably true. He looked at Joann. “I don’t even know them anymore. How old are they?”

“Grace is eleven and Joshua is five.”

“Really. Okay, all I know is there’s a few thousand in his bank account; that should hold you over. He had car insurance and probably a life policy at work, but I don’t know if any of that works for drunks who splatter into a bridge.”

“Phillip, you’re so cold about all this. They’re all talking about how, uh, unsad you are.”

“Unsad? There’s a new one. I tried to tell you I’ve hardly seen him for years; I had plenty of time to be sad.”

“Please stop it,” she said, her voice still low. “You’re not making sense again.” Two tears raced down her cheek and she dabbed them with the hanky from her suit jacket.

GREY PINE

“Okay, tell you what: After I get back this summer, I’ll sell this damn place; the equity should handle your deal.”

“That’s very generous, but your job’s here, you should keep the house.”

“Don’t want it.”

“Phillip, regardless of what you think, I care about Daddy.”

“That’s really touching, Joann. I need another drink.” He started for the house.

She returned the hanky to her pocket and followed him toward the door. “Phillip, one other thing.”

Now what? He turned around to face her again and saw his glass balanced on the back rail of the pickup. *Oops, better get that.* “Spit it out, Joann.”

“Your friend, I didn’t quite catch her last name,” she said, forcing a smile. “She seems nice, she’s, uh, quite striking. Do you mind if I ask?”

“Ask what?” *This should be good.*

“I told you, her name. And, well, her background.”

“It’s Lupe Sirhan Farouk; she’s an Arab extremist.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Okay, her name is Rosendall; she’s Mexican and Jewish.”

“Please stop it, Phillip.”

“That’s the truth, take it or leave it. Is that a problem?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

“All right, to be honest, I don’t think biracial couples have much of a chance.”

“Very nice, Joann, a genteel version of what your asshole husband would say. Jesus, what are you waiting for with him?” He pointed at her scar again.

“He didn’t actually mean to do it.” Joann slumped forward, her chin touching her chest.

“Yeah, some cop, maybe he was just trying to *protect and to serve.*”

“We could still work things out.”

"You know, it's really none of my business, just like Lupe isn't yours. Is that it now?"

"Yes, I'm finished." Her head was still down.

"This party stinks; maybe I'll get a drink and go out and look for Ali." He started back for his empty glass.

"That old cat is more important to you than—" She stopped mid-sentence, and he turned to her from the pickup.

"More important than who, Joann—Stephen—you—those people in there?" *Damn right he is.*

"I'm sorry, I'm not being charitable." She walked the rest of the way to the door.

"Spare me your Christian charity. Jesus, you don't believe me about Stephen; you think I'm a drunk, and my girlfriend is the wrong color; you must have some more crap to get off your chest."

"You're right, I'm too critical sometimes, but I have one more thing to say: When you act mean, Phillip, it's not really you," she said, downcast as she walked into the house.

Another vote for who I really am—shit. He reached for the cocktail glass but his elbow bumped the truck's rail, and the glass teetered and fell, making a shattering *pop* on impact with the concrete.

"Oh my, Joann, how embarrassing," he said to the mess. *To hell with her.* Phillip heard John Fogerty's voice twanging from the den about "...the calm before the storm." He walked toward the music but stopped and put his forehead and palms right on the door and drummed the beat with his hands until the last chorus. *Okay, John, let's shake 'em up a little.* He walked in; the few remaining guests feigned they were chatting as they watched Lupe walk over to him. Her coat was over one arm and she had freed her hair to fall over her shoulders.

"Phil, when your sister came in, she was upset," Lupe told him quietly, taking his arm. "She went straight to her room with your aunt; what's wrong?"

"Nothing, she's a damn party pooper," he said louder than he had to, and the nearby conversations ceased again as he led her toward the bar.

GREY PINE

“Phil, please,” Lupe whispered, “they’re staring at you.”

“Maybe they should just go home,” he said to her as they came to Mick. “Another *margarita*, and one here for *Lupita*.” Phillip nearly bellowed the order, saying the Spanish as best he could, accentuating the diminutives.

“See what I can do,” Lewis said, his tone acerbic, and he reached for the blender and two glasses.

“Pretty good rhyme, huh, Lupe?” Phillip said to her louder than the rock and roll.

“Phil, please lower your voice, and you know I don’t want any.” She let go of his arm.

“Doh-say mar-guh-ri-tuhs,” Mick said, pushing the drinks forward and lecherously sizing up Lupe from head to waist.

“Right, twelve should do it.” Phillip laughed and then lifted a cocktail to his mouth for a long drink while Lupe stood there nervously smoothing the coat on her arm.

Mick didn’t take his eyes off her until he finally turned to Phillip. “She ain’t like no *Lew-pea-tuh* I ever seen, kid,” he said, and then ogled her again. Lupe glowered at Mick for a moment, then turned away and saw more people gaping at them. Phillip lowered his glass and looked up at Mick.

“What’s that supposed mean?” *Prick*.

“She don’t count as no Mexican, believe me.” Mick raised his thick eyebrows, leering to a nearby man who snubbed the attempted camaraderie by making a cheese and cracker sandwich on his plate.

Phillip took a drink and put down his glass. “So, pri—, er, Mick, that’s how it works?” he asked. Lewis just nodded, ignoring or not picking up on the intentional slip.

“Lupe,” Phillip said, “shall we ask my *pendejo* neighbor why he doesn’t think you qualify as a genuine Mexican-American?” He hooked his arm into hers; Lupe’s piercing dark eyes were riveted on him.

“How do you know that word?” she asked, her voice barely audible. “Phil, please stop this.” She let go of him.

“Sure, whatever you say, *Lupita*.” He pronounced her name concisely again. “I’ll just change the goddamn subject.”

Lupe exhaled as if his expletive had slugged her in the gut. “You need to stop drinking, now,” she said.

“No, ma’am, in fact I’ll drink both of ’em.” He finished his margarita and lifted hers into the air. “A toast!” he shouted. While everyone looked at him, the only sound was John Fogerty philosophizing about the rain.

“In memory of the man who died years ago—my father,” Phillip said and then qualified his statement with calm, implacable hatred: “And may his impostor rot in hell.”

Lupe hurried away through the kitchen, face in hands. The guests watched her, perplexed about what to do.

Mick saw all eyes directed toward him; he raised his hairy arm. “I’o Steve Stark, my best friend,” he said, swaggering, and his glass almost scraped the ceiling.

Grateful to be off the hook, most of the group responded with, “Stephen,” their drinks lifted hesitantly toward Phillip.

Son of a bitch. Phillip put the margarita down.

Maybe you should stand up to him.

Phillip was glaring at his drink. *You think I can’t?* He snapped out of his reverie and faced Mick. “You didn’t even know my dad.” His words sounded flat, factual.

“You talkin’ to me?” Lewis said, not perturbed. “Me and your ol’ man was peas in a pod.”

“Yeah, Stephen and Mick the Prick, the shitfaced twins. You wouldn’t even talk to him if he was sober,” he said, scowling at Mick, unaware that some people were gathering their things and leaving.

“You’re fulla crap, kid. At least Steve could hold his damn liquor.” A bottle of whiskey in hand, Lewis moved from the kitchen to the end of the counter.

“Hold his liquor? You son of a bitch, get the hell out of this house.” Phillip poked his finger toward the hall.

GREY PINE

“What did you say?” Mick asked, completely unruffled, placing the bottle on the bar.

“You heard me. Get the hell outta here.” Phillip stepped right up to him.

“You ain’t man enough to talk to me like that, little pansy.” Lewis calmly poured himself a double shot.

His voice rising, Phillip nearly spat. “Man enough to kick out an ol’ lush like you.” The veins swelled in his neck as he bent back to look up at Mick’s stubbly face.

“You’re a joke, kid.” He leaned down, smug, offering his grizzled chin to his much shorter adversary. Phillip coiled his arm right away to land a blow on Mick’s runt of a nose but Warren was there to grab his fist before it could release.

“Stop, Phil, Jesus.” Regardless of Warren’s size, he had to put both arms around Phillip’s chest to hold him back.

“Lemme go I’ll kill the bastard.” He flailed to get free, but Kurt and another ex-Panther, Mitch, joined in to pull him back near the food, where he stumbled to his knees.

“Maybe you need another drink, Phil, relax,” Kurt said, laughing as they held him on the floor.

His face flushed radish red, Phillip looked up, snarling, “*You* relax, Kurt; lemme go, goddamn it.” He tried to stand, but they constrained him again, and he stopped struggling.

“Let ’im go,” Mick said and downed his shot with one toss. “He’d fall on his face before he could get here.”

Phillip calmed down almost as fast as he’d angered. He pointed at Mick through a tangle of arms. “You two killed my dad; sure as hell,” he said just loud enough to be heard.

“What? Jesus, listen to him. You’re nuts, kid,” Lewis said, but Phillip turned away toward the wall.

Warren walked up to Mick. “I think you better go, Mister Lewis,” he said, “this deal’s over anyway.”

Lewis actually had to look up to talk to Warren. “You just keep the crazy little bastard away from my house.” He choked a whiskey bottle

with one of his simian hands. “Shit—guess you don’t need all this.” Mick ambled out of the kitchen to the front door.

“He’s gone,” Warren said to Kurt and Mitch, who both stood up, but Phillip didn’t move. Warren had shoved the TV under the table earlier, and Phillip was watching the blank screen, the top of his head inches from the meat and cheese.

Easy, it’s okay here. Fixated on his blurry reflection in the TV; his torso began to sway.

Deciding to leave Phillip to himself a little while, Warren turned to the guests. The dozen or so who were left pretended not to watch Phillip rock silently under the table.

“We’re going to tie it up, everybody,” Warren called out. “Lot of food going to waste, please take what you want, and uh, thanks for coming.” He turned back to the table to gather some trash.

What’s he saying? Doesn’t matter, it’s quiet here; you’re comfortable—nothing matters.

“Damn, he’s one plastered cat,” Kurt said to no one in particular, laughing again.

“Just shut up,” Warren told him.

Kurt pointed to himself. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Get all your crap,” Warren ordered Kurt, who gestured helplessly toward Phillip’s head by all the food. “Phil,” Warren said, bending over to him again.

Warren seemed amorphous to Phillip, like everyone who was still there. *They’re all pissed—too bad. Not their party; Stephen’s.*

“Phil, you have to move so we can take care of the food.”

Stephen’s party; it turned out right. His epiphany made him smile, and then he laughed out loud, almost a guffaw.

“Jesus, Phil, get a grip. You gotta move.” Warren leaned down to lift Phillip’s arm.

“Okay, I’m up,” he said, chuckling as he stood, and Kurt began pushing food off the glass platters onto plastic plates. Warren led Phillip back to the bar, and Lupe stood in the hall, arms folded over her chest, contemplating the spectacle.

GREY PINE

Ms. Rosendall looks ready to kill. He saw a few other guests gawking like voyeurs at a car wreck, but he ignored them and grinned at Warren.

“Tell me what’s so damn funny,” Warren said quietly as he screwed a cap onto a bottle of tequila.

“I realized Stephen’s party turned out just right.”

“Yeah, pretty exciting there at the end. He would’ve loved the fight with his best friend.”

“That’s right, he would’ve loved it.”

“Whatever you say, Phil.”

13

The next morning, Phillip was having one of his “movie” dreams, aware of the details and able to shut it off, but the vivid scenes were too compelling to interrupt. He dreamt his missing cat was mutated into an albino mountain lion, but Ali’s eyes stayed blue and gold, not pink, and he was batting around people in Kurt’s store like they were catnip mice.

So much for their bickering. A man in an ash-covered suit and red baseball hat ran down an aisle with stolen meat, and Ali caught him and held him down. The dream zoomed into the man’s cellophane package: NEW DELICACY—WILD CAT AMOUNT—\$2.49 A POUND. When the shopper tried to crawl away, Ali toyed with his legs and then flipped him with massive paws, but now the man had long black hair, metamorphosed into a woman wearing a cowboy hat.

Geez, it’s Lupe. No, Ali, leave her alone. She held out the saint from her necklace for protection, though Ali had already disregarded her. *Good boy.* Lupe kissed the icon, thanking God for her deliverance. *Sure, give God the credit.* Ali started for Kurt Junior’s check stand, but Phillip’s brother-in-law stood there in uniform, except for tennis shoes. *Good, smack him around; see how he likes it.* Ali headed for Richard, who pulled off a sneaker and cocked his arm to throw it at the white cougar. Terrified by the shoe, Ali bolted away at impossible speed to the exit.

GREY PINE

Crap, enough of this. But he let the dream continue into the parking lot, where the puma spotted a milking bucket next to an old man opening the trunk of a white Cadillac, X'TOPCAD on its plates. Ali knocked over the milk and sucked it all up in seconds, scaring the man into his car. *Serves him right.*

Phillip watched his monstrous dream-pet vandalize his way through town without assaulting anyone. *He's searching for something.* Ali ignored a group of neighbors who were trying to help an old lady clear her yard. As soon as the people scraped up a quantity of ash, it reappeared menacingly like dull, dry quicksilver.

The mountain lion was suddenly in the Stark's back yard, leaving enormous cookie-cutter prints in the ash. Ali easily leaped the six-foot fence and approached the back of a man who was leaning over the swimming pool. *He's after Mick. Good, kill the bastard.* The great cat crouched into stalking posture and twitched inch by inch toward his prey. Ghostly, huge Ali sprung into the air and the man turned, his eyes round with terror. But he wasn't the hated neighbor; it was a sober Stephen Stark. *No, Ali!* A distorted wavy version of Mick Lewis sat at the patio table with a can of beer the size of a football in one hand; he smirked at Phillip while the cougar flung Stephen around like a rag doll.

Stop this crap. The dream lost its clarity and just a few more jumbled images raced across his mind as he came to. Phillip's gut reported in with a light pang, his back ached, and a strange dullness throbbed in his head. *No hangover with tequila—sure.* He willed himself to ignore all of it and lay still a couple minutes, his thoughts fallow until a phrase came to mind. *It was Stephen's party. Yeah, you acted just like him. Don't think about that now—a little more sleep.* An agitated slumber slowly overtook him again.

The night before, Phillip left the house a few minutes after Mick, not telling anyone. He searched Ponderosa Estates and the surrounding countryside for Ali, then came back sobered from the long walk, ready to apologize to Lupe and Joann. Warren was the only one there, napping in a recliner after finishing the cleanup with Aunt May, Joann

and Lupe. He told Phillip they waited for him before sharing a taxi to the airport, where Lupe's father met her. Before Warren left, he said he'd be by in the morning to help him get Stephen's car.

Now Phillip's sleep was disturbed again when the scene reappeared of Mick grinning on the patio. *Why's he smirking? He knows you told Stephen off. That's nuts, it's a damn dream.* Phillip opened his eyes and gazed at a fly crawling on the light fixture. He thought about Mrs. Rosendall giving him the cold shoulder when he tried to call Lupe after Warren left. *What did you expect? Warren's probably the only one who isn't pissed.* He noticed his ulcer had quieted, but his back still hurt and there was something else. *Cold—how could my head be so cold? Must be the hangover.*

Phillip sat up and slowly swung his feet below, but his heels and soles settled onto his silky Hawaiian shirt, not the carpet. The garment seemed to send a shiver up his backbone and join forces with the frigid sensation already in his head. *Jesus, so cold and heavy. What is this?* He flipped the shirt aside with his toes and put his feet on the dry, rough floor. With elbows on his knees and palms on his temple, he stared at the design in the orange and brown carpet as if he had never seen it.

It's that French iris thing—what do they call it? Flor-de-lay, something like that. His eyes traced the pattern. *Strange how one figure just melts into the next—one and then another, and another—up, then down, and . . .*

His head and then his whole body started to follow the rhythm. *Go again. Up, then down, and over. Why are you doing this? Curve around, and up, down to the next one. Why not? It doesn't hurt anything—it's comfortable, like in the reflection. Take the small curve up then back down, and over . . .* He rocked for minutes with the contours of the design.

The coldness is going. Up to the top, next back down, into the middle, up, then straight, and around . . . Soon, he leaned onto his side and slept yet again.

"What the hell?" Phillip said as he awoke sometime later. The

GREY PINE

sound of his own words made him more alert. *What was all that? Rocking like an idiot. Crap, it doesn't matter.* He reached for the work clothes he'd thrown across a chair near his bed. *Should be looking for Ali; it's been four days, five maybe.* As he plodded his way across the long room, he buttoned his jeans and put on the dirty tee shirt.

In the bathroom he looked at his disheveled hair and bloodshot eyes in the mirror. *The zombie walks.* He turned and lifted the shirt to look at his sore back, and at the base of his spine there was a round black bruise about the diameter of a one-inch dowel. *How'd that happen?* Phillip faced the mirror and moved a hand across one cheek, the skin of his palm hardly grating over his soft, light beard. He could see the faint contour of jawbone. *That was never there; maybe you **have** lost a little weight—big deal. Damn, didn't check the time; Warren's coming.*

Phillip finished in the bathroom and went straight to the hallway where he spotted a dark, still object up ahead on the kitchen floor. *A carcass—Ali's back!* He dashed into the kitchen and found part of a striped garter snake on the linoleum.

"Ali, you fart, where are you?" he called, returning to the hallway. He noticed that someone during the wake had left the doors to the parlor slightly open. Phillip slid one door back and there was the old white cat, asleep on Ellen Stark's red, white and blue afghan.

I'll be damned. "Hey, boy," he said, uplifted for the first time in days. Ali raised his head, and Phillip walked over, sat on the well-preserved couch and checked his pet for fresh battle scars. *No, he's okay.* He rubbed the cat's ears; Ali purred and pushed his head into Phillip's fingers.

"Wiped out, huh, gato? Nice snake you brought." *You should see what you were doing in my dream.* He stopped petting, and Ali put his head on his paws and returned to his own dreams. *You deserve to be pissed, but you could've come back sooner. Too many people around.*

Conditioned to remove anything that didn't belong in the room, he reached over to pick up Ali. *Wait, what am I doing? Shit, from now on—*"This room is open," he said and shoved the other door back all the way, startling the cat awake. He looked up at Phillip.

“That’s right, Ali, sleep here any time you want.”

Unimpressed by his human’s enthusiasm, the cat, as if on cue, put his head right back down. Phillip watched him for a few moments, then went into the kitchen. He stepped over the snake and looked out front, half expecting to see the results of his labor drowned in the mercurial ash from the dream, but the yard, of course, remained relatively free of soot.

Stupid dream. Leaning his forehead on the window, he peered out; it seemed like he was looking up from inside a concrete coliseum. Above a battleship-grey horizon, an oval of blue sky had a speckled egg of a waning moon at its center.

Clearest day so far. I feel better, but what was that crap earlier? Didn’t seem like a hangover. He stood at the sink and opened the bottle of ulcer medicine out of habit. Phillip took the drug and then picked up the non-aspirin. *Don’t need it.* He put the bottle down and saw Warren’s little car glide into the driveway. He finally checked the clock. *Twelve ten, how could that be?*

Warren parked at the garage door, turned his head sideways and extricated himself from the car. He wore a green Oakland A’s cap, hiking boots, jeans, and a white tee shirt that showed muscles he didn’t have in high school. Though Warren had been around for a few days, Phillip hadn’t noticed his changed physique.

Man, he’s huge. Phillip hurried down to the end of the hallway and opened the door. “Hey, you still talking to me?”

“Not on the phone; I suppose you turned it off again. Damned modern inconveniences.”

“I think it’s on.” They remained in the doorway.

“I called twice; I was running some errands—you gonna let me in?”

“C’mon.” As Warren entered, Phillip peeked out and caught himself checking for the dream ash again. *Jesus, forget that.* He shut the door and turned to Warren. “Where’s the blue ox?”

“What?”

“Friggin’ Paul Bunyan; I didn’t notice how huge you are.”

GREY PINE

“Oh, Marilyn’s cooking.” Warren poked Phillip’s side. “What about you? You’re under your playing weight.”

“No way.”

“Yeah? I bet you didn’t eat today, ya’ little shit. Did you see all the stuff in the fridge? You need to eat.” They started up the long hallway.

“Great. Handy health advice from Big Turd, really big turd.”

Warren stopped and pointed at Phillip’s jeans. “Speaking of turds, look at you. You wash those since the volcano?”

“Wear ’em to rags. It’s the latest.”

“Yeah, you sound like you feel pretty good,” Warren said more seriously and moved ahead.

“I do now. Man, when I woke up—”

“Hangover?”

“Guess so.” They neared the kitchen. “Thanks for everything last night; sorry for the hassle.”

“Forget it, Rocky,” Warren said with a laugh. “You were actually going to hit that jerk-off.”

“Drunk talk.”

“Bull. What the hell is that on the floor?”

“Half a snake,” Phillip said as if it were a treasure. He reached into the sink for a fork.

“Your cat’s back?” Warren nudged the stiffening remains of the reptile with his boot.

“Yeah, he’s here, crapped out,” Phillip said and slipped the utensil under the snake.

“Well, farm house; no wonder you’re so damn cheerful. Ready to get the car?”

“All set, after I put some food out for Ali,” he said, dropping the severed carcass into the trash.

“Yeah, he’s had enough snake.” Warren opened the refrigerator and salivated over the meat, cheese and desserts. “Look at all this grub. What do you want?” Warren asked, sweeping his arm along the food like a TV game-show model.

“Not hungry.” He brought down a can of cat food. “Where did you put the can opener, Warren?”

“Dun’no, yr’ aunt dried d’ dish’s,” he said, garbling his words on a hunk of kielbasa. “I his’s great, try-s’m.”

“Take all that meat with you; whatever else you want.” He pulled open a drawer as Warren swallowed his snack.

“Let’s see if I can guess. Now you don’t eat *any* meat.”

“Pretty much. So?” Phillip found the opener in with the carving knives.

“Doesn’t surprise me, but you have to eat *something*.”

He twisted the device on the can. “I eat, damn it.”

“All right, all right, I’m going to check your phone.” Warren took more Polish sausage with him to the den.

Phillip leaned down to push the tuna into a bowl; Ali was already there, nudging Phillip’s arm. He stroked Ali’s fur as the cat simultaneously purred and gobbled fish. *Glad you’re back, you ol’ stinker*. He stood up as Warren came in.

“Man, he’s hungry all right. You must’ve been wasted, Phil, the ringer’s on. You never told me what happened to this phone.” Warren nodded to the wires and bare bracket on the wall.

Shit. Phillip’s eyes glazed over. “Busted it.”

“You mean on purpose?”

Yeah, on purpose. He stared at his cat.

“Jesus, you want to tell me about it?”

“Some other time.”

“Okay, whatever you say. Ready to go?”

Don’t be such a drag, Phillip. He turned to Warren and tried to sound upbeat. “Yeah, just need you to move the Bug.”

“No, let’s take it. Maybe we’ll use the truck for a hike this afternoon; we could both use a break.”

“I should start on the back yard. Stephen, he—” *Not any more, idiot*. His eyebrows knotted.

“Hey, it’s okay. We can do that if you really want to.”

GREY PINE

"No, I don't care if it sits back there all summer. Where do you want to hike?"

"Buzzard Point, maybe?"

"Yeah, let's go." Buzzard Point was one of Phillip's favorite places for a spur-of-the-moment excursion. You could drive all the way up to an abandoned fire lookout, then take off hiking with a minimum of gear. Warren showed him the spot the summer after they graduated from high school.

Phillip retrieved Stephen's spare keys from the hall closet. He put on his soiled baseball hat and his boots, then went out through the garage, leaving the door up for later. They got in the Volkswagen, Warren's dark red hair brushing the headliner as Phillip buckled his seat belt.

Warren laughed at him. "Ready, Captain Safety Patrol?"

"Cut loose, Big Turd," Phillip said. Warren backed out, drove down the block, and they opened their windows to let in the warm, late-spring air.

"Just what I need, Stephen's damn Chevy," Phillip said.

"Any lay but a Chevrolet. You ever drive it much?"

"Some; Stephen wouldn't ride in my pickup; hated to see it in the driveway. He called this the *goddamn kraut car*."

"Jesus," Warren said and then changed the subject to the NBA playoffs. They casually talked basketball on their way out of the development and down the state road. When they got near Ponderosa, Phillip asked him to drive through town instead of to the junction.

Almost ten days after the ash fall, Ponderosa still had the aura of a disaster zone, most people cleaning, scraping or hauling; few of them back to their routines. The two young men observed all the single-minded activity until Warren wound the Volkswagen into last gear on the four-lane highway to Four Rivers. Though the road had been cleared repeatedly, enough of the irrepressible powder was still around to keep the sporadic traffic well below the speed limit.

"What do you think you'll do with the house?" Warren asked as he settled into the right lane at about forty.

“Sell it to some Koreans, a gift for Mick since he didn’t get Stephen’s flag.”

“No, you wouldn’t be that mean to the Koreans.”

“I’ll worry about the house and car when I get back from the project. They said they’d be calling soon.”

“Do you know when you’re leaving?”

“No. After they call, I’ll just camp up there and organize my gear.”

“What about the cat?”

“I worked it out with Mister Beck; he’ll feed him, watch the house. What about you—finished with everything?”

“Yeah, I’m outta here tomorrow unless you need any—”

“I’ll be fine,” Phillip interrupted. “You’ve already helped enough, I apprecia—”

“Damn, check this.” Warren’s eyes were on the mirror. “SOB must be doing seventy.” The dark streak of a sedan passed them in the left lane, blowing up enough ash that Warren had to brake and downshift.

“Just like the jerk the other day, except I couldn’t see my hood,” Phillip said, and then napkins, straws, paper bags and drink cups tumbled from the billows behind the other car.

“Ah, look what he left for us,” Warren said.

“There’s your real pig. Hell, pigs are smarter.”

Warren laughed. “You sure you have an opinion on this?”

“Pisses me off. Everything’s his damn cesspool.”

“Yeah, but he’ll get his, just a matter of time.”

“You’re such a fatalist.” He watched a tractor in a nearby field pulling a weighted-down disk, but the ash didn’t seem to plow under; twenty-foot grey clouds rolled behind the harrow. Phillip broke the brief silence. “That guy’s Cadillac was in the dream I had last night.”

“The guy who ran you off the road?”

“Yeah, it was bizarre; realistic at the same time.”

“So what happened?” Warren gradually resumed his speed.

“A cougar with Ali’s face was scaring people in Kurt’s store, but not hurting them much. I sort of controlled him.”

GREY PINE

“So you let him rip up the guy in the Cadillac.”

“No, some old man I saw there the other day was in the car. Ali just terrorized him a little.”

“Should’ve been Kurt. Who else was in it?”

Stephen, and Mick. “Lupe. We spared her,” he said, his face glum.

“Mighty nice of you.” The traffic had become steadier, and Warren’s eyes moved between the mirrors and the road.

“I called to apologize after you left; her mother was pissed but tried not to show it. I get along with her, but I think she lied. She said Lupe was there, but asleep.”

“Have you told Lupe the project is on?”

“Yeah, the day before the funeral. She didn’t say much, but she wasn’t thrilled.”

“Last night she was waiting to talk to you.” His next thought made him wince. “I hope Dear John isn’t on the way.”

Shorty could’ve bit the dust. “My little impersonation of Stephen last night could have screwed everything.”

“Maybe, but you don’t know for sure.” Warren slowed for an old wide Thunderbird that inched by on the left. They watched the ash swirl only a couple feet off of the ground.

“I’ll call her again tonight,” Phillip said.

“Do that, see where you stand. By the way, your sister’s someone who *isn’t* pissed at you.”

“Oh sure. What are you talking about?”

“She wanted to apologize to you about something; even paid for the taxi to wait before they had to go.”

“Crap, I was the jerk last night, not her. On top of everything else, Meyers is beating her.”

“Figures. I met him just that once; reminded me of a wacko I knew in basic.” Warren checked the rearview again. As the ash diminished with their distance from Ponderosa, he had increased his speed to fifty. They rolled the windows part way up to continue their conversation.

“Phil, I have to tell you something, just tell me to shut up if I’m out of line.” Phillip nodded and Warren continued:

“When I called you last week, you were pretty stressed out, nothing was going right.”

“I guess.”

“So then to have something happen like your father—”

“Joann said I was *unsad*.”

“Well, yeah, it seems like you’re denying it in a way.”

“Believe me, Warren, I know he’s dead. Remember, you asked me once why I sometimes used his first name?”

“When he was drinking.”

“Yes, but it was extreme, schizo even; the Stephen side was in charge and I don’t miss him. Sounds bad, I know.”

“No, I think I’m starting to get it. But why are you so flat-out pissed at other people?”

“Mick? I guess I *was* going to hit him.”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean, you never hit anybody in your life.”

“I never hated anybody so much.”

“More than Fike?”

Phillip sneered at the comparison. “No contest.”

“Even I usually can’t tell when you’re pissed about something, Phil, but now you just let it go, even over ordinary things. And it’s not because of the funeral; I noticed it at Christmas. What was going on then?” He waited for an answer, checking the road.

“The fighting started with him last fall.”

“Over Lupe?”

“That was part of it, everything else just built up.”

“And it’s still eating at you.”

Told him off, and Dad’s dead. Without answering, Phillip leaned his head on the window and saw the ash-covered farms and fields only as a grey blur. His temple began to sweat where it touched the glass.

“Phil, you want to talk about it?”

No, don’t bum him out. “Not right now.”

“All right, maybe later. If you don’t fix things with Lupe, who else can you talk to around here?”

GREY PINE

Nobody. Crap, stop your damn violin. He sat up. "I know a couple teachers; I can always see Kurt and the boys."

"Sure, as long as the subject is tits and ass."

Phillip chuckled. "I'll be fine."

"If you ever use your phone, remember to call me, ya' little shit." Warren switched on the radio to the Beatles singing "Hey Jude." They listened, watching the light traffic.

"Heard this a hundred times, never paid attention to the words," Phillip said, and listened some more. "What's *that* supposed to mean, give up who you are for love? What crap."

"Okay, here's the *nah-nah-nah-nahs*, no more lyrics."

To Phillip, the song's refrain drug on endlessly while he stared at the barren countryside. When they arrived at the airport, he marveled at the mere inch or so of ash in the undisturbed areas.

After arranging for Stephen's car, Phillip followed the Volkswagen into Four Rivers. The city had recently surpassed a hundred thousand in population, due mainly to mining, lumber, agricultural commerce, and the state university. Unlike Ponderosa, the business areas were all active and clear of ash, so Warren insisted on stopping at a pizza place before starting for home. He asked Phillip to choose the toppings, and they took their drinks and plates to a table and waited for their order. When a petite but plain girl brought the mushroom-and-black-olive pizza, she flirted with Warren as he fumbled with napkins from the dispenser.

"You're so tall you must be a basketball player," she said, placing the pan between them and picking up their plastic number. Warren smiled as she left.

"She's so short, she must be a miniature golfer," Phillip said.

Trying not to laugh, Warren peeled off two pizza wedges for his plate. "Phil, that was cold. I think she heard you."

"No she didn't. Don't you get tired of that crap?" Phillip slanted his eyes toward her.

"What, girls smiling at me? No, especially since it never happened until I was twenty-five."

“You know what I mean.”

“Take it easy, you’re getting pissed about nothing again.” Warren stretched a taffy-like string of mozzarella from the pizza slice to his mouth.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“Eat,” Warren urged with his mouth full, already fingering his next piece. “This pizza’s pretty good,” he said between bites. They ate quietly for a few minutes and Warren finished his fourth slice while Phillip only nibbled on his second. “So this is how you order it if you’re a vegetarian?” Warren asked.

“Don’t know, maybe they order the vegetarian pizza.”

“Smart ass, I thought you were some sort of vegetarian.” Warren lifted another wedge off the pan.

“I’m not anything,” Phillip said.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Not vegetarian, Bulgarian or Presbyterian—name it, I’m not it.” He drank some soda, pushing his pizza aside.

“That’s pretty heavy, Phil, but you’re wrong. You’ll always be a Panther through and through, black and white, fight, fight, fi—” Warren chewed around the last *fight*.

“Right arm, Big ‘Turd, I’ll always be a frigging Ponderosa Panther.” Phillip managed a slit of a smile.

“You won’t even be a little shit if you don’t eat something.”

Warren lifted the last slice to his friend, who shook his head and then sipped soda while Warren finished off the order, including what was left on Phillip’s plate.

Phillip followed Warren onto the highway to Ponderosa but had to stop halfway at the rest area when his eyelids grew heavy and his head shivered a little, like in the morning. After resting a few minutes, he rolled the windows all the way down and continued the trip. When he arrived at the house, Warren was parked in the driveway, his head back on the seat.

Phillip drove by him and parked inside next to the pickup. “Want black beauty in here?” he called back.

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Warren leaned out of the window. “No. What happened to you? I almost turned around.”

“Got drowsy, had to stop a sec.” Phillip got in the truck and backed out of the garage. “Close up for me, okay? I’ll get my stuff.” He hurried to his room for his daypack, which was ready with the bare essentials though he hadn’t been hiking for weeks. Phillip added binoculars, camera, an Audubon pocket book, and a thick manual for keying wildflowers. He took his red camping knife from the desk and slipped it into a front pocket of his jeans.

After filling his water bottle in the bathroom, he rushed to the front door. *Wait, check Ali.* He dropped the equipment and walked over to the parlor. Peeking in from the doorway, Phillip saw Ali had scrunched up the Afghan and was nearly camouflaged by white yarn. *Man, still asleep—he’s okay. Just go.* He returned to his gear, got his windbreaker from the hall closet, and then jogged out to the truck to deposit his pack under the tarp in back.

Phillip climbed into the cab snickering at Warren, who was sitting up straight, knees above the dashboard. “Hold on, Ichabod,” he said, smiling, then pulled the lever to push the bench seat back.

“Thanks.” Warren adjusted his legs to the extra room, his right elbow protruding way out of the open window. “Can you still reach the pedals, Phil?” he asked.

“Funny. You know, you’re too damned wide to be Ichabod. You look more like Bill Walton.” Phillip was still grinning.

“Wish I could play ball like him. It’s about time you laughed at something. Let’s roll, wise-ass.” Warren attempted to snuggle into the headrest as Phillip backed past the Volkswagen and into the street.

At the Ponderosa Estates entrance he turned right, heading away from town in sparse traffic. While Warren dozed, Phillip saw the depth of ash gradually decrease at the side of the road. In another ten miles, the pines began to show up amongst the sage, and he came to a road-side grocery with a pretentious sign: THE BLUE VALLEY INN. Two long curves after the small store, they arrived at the crest above Blue Valley.

My God. He slowed and then coasted the truck about a hundred yards down the slope before pulling to the side of the road. “Hey, check this.” He coaxed Warren with an elbow until he opened his eyes to take in the scene.

“Yeah, farm house,” he said then returned to his nap.

Blue Valley had overcome its thin layer of ash to become a spectacle worthy of the day it must have been named. The four-mile-long valley floor, probably a primordial lake, hosted a scattering of ponderosa pines, a few scraggly oaks and an occasional dwelling, but the rest of it that day was primarily lupine and chicory. The only divergent colors in the expanse of blue wildflowers were random dabs of burnt-orange and dark-red paintbrush. Phillip realized the colors were even more striking because they didn’t have to compete with green undergrowth that was mostly blotted out by ash.

After turning off the motor, Phillip got out of the truck and took the wildflower book and the small camera from his pack. He had once been a more serious photographer but gradually decided that preoccupation with the equipment was less important than experiencing what he was trying to shoot. Nevertheless, as Phillip took a snapshot of Blue Valley he again regretted that he hadn’t repaired his old thirty-five millimeter camera.

He took a second photo from a different angle, finishing the roll, then walked across the road and bent down to inspect the lupine, which seemed to be a truer blue than the purplish blossoms he was accustomed to elsewhere. Like the lupine, the unopened buds on the skeletal chicory stems were powdered with ash. He saw that most of the paintbrush had yet to bloom and surmised that in a couple weeks the floral lake would reverse into a riot of orange and red, the leftover blue wildflowers filling in as a sobering accent.

“Having fun?” Warren called from the truck.

“Yeah, life goes on. Conditions must’ve been perfect.”

“Take your time, walk on in, that’s what we’re here for.”

“No, I’m coming,” Phillip said, and returned to the truck. “I took

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most of this roll during the ash fall—just finished it.”

“I’ll want to see those.” Still groggy, Warren leaned back to snooze again while Phillip quickly checked some information in his wildflower text. He turned back onto the road and drove slowly, still enjoying the meadows, which were interspersed by only a few home sites, mostly cabins or trailers on large acreages.

Rock escarpment rimmed the left side of the valley, but the opposite ridge was thick with ponderosas and the beginning of the firs. Hop Wing’s and the “museum” awaited travelers at the far end of the valley, twenty-five miles before the ski area. Phillip would be taking the Buzzard Point turnoff into national forest ten miles past the defunct ranch.

The Ski-Eden road had always been Phillip’s main access to the mountains, and he usually stopped at the restaurant on the way up or back for some sweet and sour vegetables over rice. Hop Wing’s was now referred to laughingly in Ponderosa as “the only sign of life at the ghost ranch,” but many townsfolk were more than willing to take a scenic ride through the foothills for some passable *moo goo gai pan*.

As Phillip approached the end of the valley, the stands of pine grew closer together and most of the flowers converged toward the sunlight by the road. Without coming to a stop, a full logging truck entered the highway from the ranch.

When did that start? Phillip slowed for the semi and signaled to turn right. In his rearview mirror, the flashers of a cement truck indicated that it was also entering the old development. *What is all this?* It was over a month since he’d been to Hop Wing’s; he didn’t recall anything unusual.

At the entrance he slowed some more and made the turn, the cement truck right behind. The log arch was the same, PONDEROSA RANCH burned into the wood, the poles on both sides adorned with rusted branding irons. He drove by the pines that hid the ranch from the highway and discovered that the gravel road was leading to construction equipment up ahead.

Good God, they're not dumb enough to try this again. Phillip came to a two-sectioned mustard-colored earthmover, huge windows up front and a monstrous scoop of a body in the rear. It waited like an enormous sleeping insect, dwarfing a nearby faded-yellow road grader. He drove around and pulled over to the side of the road behind a car and three pickups.

After the cement truck passed, Phillip turned his head toward Hop Wing's. The restaurant appeared to be closed and the gift shop/museum was boarded up. The old false-fronted buildings had been razed, and in their place a labyrinth of wood foundation forms sprawled over the property, the rebar standing erect like wiry braids. The just-arrived cement truck waited, its cavernous drum revolving while an earlier arrival deposited its cargo down a trough. About twenty laborers worked the sloppy concrete or were occupied elsewhere in and around the foundation.

"Here already?" Warren stretched out of his slumber.

"Not quite, Sleeping Beauty. We're just at Hop Wing's."

"You hungry now? I could probably go for some dessert."

"No, take a look."

"What the hell?" Warren said as he took in the activity and equipment. Another loaded logging truck sped through the development, the timbers on top shifting precariously with each bump in the road. The rig momentarily blocked their view, and they turned away from the dust. Phillip saw an undisturbed meadow not far from the road where thousands of dollar pancake-sized bright yellow sunflowers waved in the light breeze.

Need to check out that field. He looked back at the construction and watched three men lug away a red six-foot plywood horseshoe, a relic of the old miniature golf course.

"What do you think, Warren?"

"Got me; that's a lot of foundation."

"What's with all the trees they're taking out?"

"Private land; maybe they're logging to make ends meet."

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Phillip turned the wheel to the left and crossed the road, heading for two small trailers next to the work site. To get there, he drove around a maze of construction materials piled up in the parking lot. A couple dozen trucks and cars were lined up diagonally to the trailers.

“Son of a bitch, there he is,” Phillip said, approaching a long white sedan. “It’s my friend. Look.”

“Who?”

It was the Cadillac, X’TOPCAD on its Florida vanity plate.

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"I suppose you're going back over there," Warren said as Phillip parked in some shade by the sunflower meadow.

"We need to see what's going on." He shut off the motor.

"Who the hell is *we*, you and the mouse in your pocket?"

"Come on, Warren." Phillip opened the door, got out and reached back for his wildflower manual.

"What'll you do if you find the guy, throw that at him?"

"I'm just going to check out this field, and then see what they're up to."

Warren leaned back. "I'll wait here; behave yourself."

"Yes, mom." Phillip closed the door and glared at the bustling site. *The prick runs me off the road to get to this mess. Later for the meadow, ask XTOPCAD a few questions.* He scraped the ground with the toe of his boot. *No ash at all.* Phillip headed across the lot for the trailers.

He came up to the side window of the extravagant white car. Soaped onto the glass in precise script there was a phone number and: FOR SALE: '77 CADDY - SERIOUS INQUIRIES ONLY. *A little serious justice—scratch the sucker one end to the other.* Phillip felt the thick knife bulge in his pocket. *Yeah, get real.* He stepped around a three-wheel all-terrain motorcycle and walked to the trailer with a black OFFICE sign.

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The one-rail porch was the square makeshift kind they use in trailer lots; the stairs wobbled as he took each step up to the door. Phillip decided to knock, and a woman's voice called for him to come in. He entered the small office and the secretary glanced up from her typewriter, ignoring him. He let go of the door and saw a cigarette on her desk; the air was thick with smoke and sweet perfume.

Aak. He turned away, coughed, and she continued to peck at the keyboard. Phillip quickly surveyed the small room, its cheap desk and chair, two steel filing cabinets, a copying machine, and an entrance to the inner office. In block letters, a black and white plaque spelled MR. LOPES above the doorway. *Lopes? Not with a Z?*

Still acting like no one was there, the secretary stood to open a file drawer, her patent leather high heels clicking on the linoleum with each footfall. Below a coiffure of congealed yellow hair, she masked her milky face with pink rouge, eyeliner and crimson lip gloss. Her willowy body was encased in a synthetic white pullover and a tight beige skirt.

God, somebody's idea of loveliness—she could be twenty or forty. The woman took a step back toward her desk and finally looked directly at him.

"Excuse me," he said, surprised how meek he sounded. She peered myopically down her nose, as if to a lower species. *My grubby clothes; we disgust each other.*

"Well, can I help you?" she asked.

Thanks, oh office queen for recognizing I exist. "Sorry to bother you, I was—"

"If you're looking for work, we aren't hiring right now, but you can take an app." She pointed the lacquered blood-red nail of one forefinger toward a small rack of papers on a file cabinet. Her thin black eyebrows rose with a second thought. "I'll save you the time, he only hires Mexicans for general labor." She sat back down to her work.

No, he hires illegals from anywhere—slave wages in cash, like Mick. "Not looking for work. I was wondering if you could answer a couple questions for me."

“What is it you want?” Her bony fingers stopped typing and she looked at him again, her powdered lashes flapping once. She flicked the cigarette in the ashtray, her cold body language saying, “This better be good.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on with this construction?”

“First phase of Ponderosa Ridge Resort—indoor pool, cocktail lounge, everything,” she said with a hint of enthusiasm, finally resigned to put up with the distraction for a moment.

“And outside? What are they using that dirt mover for?”

“For the lake.” The lady took a drag of her cigarette.

“A lake? Where?”

She crushed the butt in her ashtray. “Some empty field.”

“The big meadow with all the sunflowers?”

“How would I know? They start on it after they clear the trees for the bunny slope.”

Good God. “Okay, so what’s the lake for?”

“It’s like a big fish pond. If you don’t have any more questions, I’ll get back to work.”

“I have a question about the permits.”

She picked up her phone and punched a button. “Someone to ask about your permits, Mister Lopes.” The secretary said the name as if it rhymed with *ropes*. She listened a moment before hanging up, then returned to her keyboard. In a few seconds the door to the office opened and a man in a western suit, bolo tie and cowboy boots stood in the doorway. Without the heels, he was probably three inches shorter than Phillip.

“Good afternoon, I’m Xavier Lopes.” With an ingratiating smile, he pronounced his surname like the secretary did. He also spoke with a light accent and ran his words together as if he were impatient for the sentence to end. In his late forties, Lopes’ fair skin was rough and pocked; he had thick black eyebrows, closely trimmed grey hair and a dark, neat moustache. He began to lift his arm to shake hands, but when he got a closer look at Phillip, he held the impulse.

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Mister XTOPCAD—little man, big car, shit-eating grin. “I’m Phillip Stark. Could you answer a couple of questions for me?” he asked, still near the secretary’s desk.

“Please come in, Mister Star,” Lopes said, his five words spoken like one, and he turned to go back in his office.

Phillip walked to the door. *Don’t we sound so busy and important? Florida plates, he’s probably Cuban.* He entered and remained standing while Lopes closed the door and circled his unpretentious black metal desk. It was an austere room—discount furniture and no decorations save one, a gory two-foot crucifix on the back wall. *Ah, a true believer.*

Lopes’ white cowboy hat hung from a peg near the icon of Jesus. The desk was supplied with a phone, calendar pad, file rack, in-and-out basket, and a parade watcher’s miniature U.S. flag. On the developer’s yellow legal pad, an expensive gold pen lay next to a mechanical pencil and a silver dollar. The coin was drilled with three holes, one linked to Lopes’ keys, the others to a shiny black prayer stone and a rabbit’s foot.

This creep is extra superstitious.

“Please have a seat—I’m afraid we’re not much to look at so far; are we, Mister Star?” he asked from his plastic chair, speaking again without pauses.

No, not much at all. “It’s Stark.” He sat in a metal folding chair, his book on his lap.

“Yes, of course,” Lopes said slowly, and then he resumed his rapid-fire speech. “Our new office will be a bit more comfortable. Now how can I help you?” He twisted his keys and amulets around an index finger.

“Looks like you lucked out on the ash fall.”

“Yes, it could’ve put us way behind schedule; it’s a good sign when God chooses to spare someone from such a disaster.”

A good sign, hot damn. “So, is that your Cadillac?”

“Yes, are you interested?” He smiled at that prospect.

Something funny? Phillip shook his head.

“Yes, of course,” Lopes said again before speeding his pace. “You seem to be more the outdoor type Mister Stark. Perhaps you can help

me—you see, I need a car that is rugged but nicely equipped for when I'm back in civilization. Do you have a suggestion?" Lopes took a breath and grinned.

"Sure, try a Gimmy." *It'll break down in a month.* "Maybe you could tell me how you got permits for all this and why nobody knows about it?" he asked, contempt slipping into his voice. *Easy, or you won't find out squat.*

"My, my, that was a quick change of subject. We have no secrets, Mister Stark; we're just low key for a while. You aren't from one of those environmentalist groups, are you? The public is starting to think they're destroying jobs to save a few trees, and I suggest—"

"Listen, I'm not from any group. I live here, and I, uh, have concerns about what you're doing."

"I see. Well, that's really too bad, our hundred sixty acres border private land on three sides, all zoned recreational business property; I don't have to do this but I'll show you a file with permits, deeds, everything." He paused to breathe. "Then perhaps you can go home, I imagine to a nice little cabin in the woods." With a condescending smile, Lopes lifted the file from the desk and handed it across to his unwanted visitor.

Phillip opened the manila folder. *Give him something to chew on.* "Has anyone bothered to tell you what locals call this place?" he asked, skimming the papers.

"No, but I think you're about to tell me."

"The ghost ranch; just ask around." Phillip looked up to see the man's smile fade a bit. *Spooked him a little—a babe in the woods.* "So, how did you get clearance for a ski area and a lake so fast?"

"A trout pond, Mister Stark; and the rope tow is little more than a kiddy ride for our skiers to warm up with the children before they drive up the mountain. As for the permits, Doctor Maxwell is my partner and he's one of the previous owners; we didn't have to start from scratch."

"Very convenient. These papers are all made out to Maxwell, and Javier Lopez." Phillip returned the file to his desk and sat back.

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“My legal name.” His tone was turning blunt.

Ashamed of something? “You’re from Florida, Mister Lopez?”

“Lopes. Yes, not that it’s any of your business.”

“Cuban background?” *Squirm, asshole.*

“Argentina, but that’s also none of your business.”

“True, but this development is; it affects my research up here,” he lied, holding up the keying manual as if it were related to his work. “Most people in this area won’t like your little project. Hop Wing’s wouldn’t make a dime without customers from Ponderosa.”

Lopes smirked with confidence. “A dime is about what it did make; Hop Wing’s will soon be The Ridge Barbecue; you might be interested to know that several other local businessmen supported my minority enterprise loan.”

“Minority? You’re ashamed of your own name.” *Take it easy.* Phillip heard thudding footsteps outside on the porch.

“Mister Stark, my patience is at its end; you don’t have any business here; I’ll thank you to leave my property.”

One bit of business—freak him a little. “I’d like to explain my concerns about—”

“Your concerns are of no consequence to me.”

“You’d want to know that the backcountry east of here is—” Phillip stopped his sentence as Warren walked into the office. His tall, burly frame filled the doorway, and the developer’s eyes opened wide with alarm.

“He wouldn’t listen to me,” the secretary said, whining from behind the open door.

Lopes was clutching the charms on his desk. “What is it you want here?” he asked Warren.

Phillip saw his other arm reach into a desk drawer and stiffen. *What the hell?*

“Easy there, big shot,” Warren said, extending his palms downward in a calming gesture. “Barbie wouldn’t let me in; I just came to get my friend.”

He walked over to Phillip, who watched the man's arm relax. *It's a gun—son of a bitch.*

"I see," Lopes said, turning to the secretary. "I'll handle this," he told her, and she squinted at the intruders as she left. Lopes slowly placed his hand back on the desk then had to tilt his chair back to speak to Warren. "It's Mister Stark here who wants to argue and insult me; I want you two to leave now, and don't trespass here again." He was back to his staccato speech, but the smile was gone.

"Let's go." Warren gently pulled Phillip's shoulder.

Nail the bastard. "Just a second," he said, composing himself as he stood to face Lopes. "I started to tell you something—"

"If you don't leave now, I'll call the police."

"We're leaving." Phillip took one sideways step toward the door. "Hasn't anyone told you about the throwback cougar in this valley?" he asked, taking another small step.

"Your motive for saying such a thing is obvious; you don't frighten me; now leave."

"I admit I don't care if he scares the hell out of you," Phillip said.

"I'm out of patience with this nonsense." Lopes reached for the phone.

"I'm trying to explain that I'm doing my doctoral research up here in albinism," Phillip said, holding up the wildflower manual. "We're searching for that cougar's lair in these hills. My friend is helping me; he'll tell you." He turned to Warren, who looked puzzled for only a moment.

"He's a zoologist, specializes in wild cats. Let's get back to work, Phil." Warren sounded staid, convincing.

Lopes held the receiver in one hand, blocking the dial tone with the other. "I still doubt your sincerity, Mister Stark, but repeat what it is you *say* you're studying."

"Albinism, this puma is an albino. He's larger than normal, a throwback—we estimate more than a hundred twenty kilograms," Phillip said with a professorial air; then switched to a casual tone. "He

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uses this ridge to roam from below here on up to Buzzard Point into the national wilderness. I've only seen him once myself, in the moonlight for a few seconds; his white fur made him look like a ghost. He scared *me*, and I was looking for him." The developer's face blanched, and Phillip paused. Lopes put down the phone and moved his hand slowly over to his talismans.

The SOB's listening now. "Sometimes I dream about him. The other night in a dream my car was parked in the woods, and the cougar snuck up real close and, well, it was just a nightmare, but I've learned to pay attention to such things." *Right, Mister X?* "Fortunately, I do most of my research in the day." He glanced at Lopes' hand stroking the rabbit's foot. "This much is for sure: You're expanding up that ridge, smack into his territory, and I expect the lion to defend his ground. Whatever you have in that drawer won't do you much good in the dark." He nodded to the desk.

When Phillip stopped, Warren managed to keep a serious face though he expected the man would laugh at them. Lopes sat there speechless, considering Phillip's words, his fingers now fondling the prayer stone.

"So your little tale is over and now you'll leave," Lopes finally said, trying to sound like Phillip's story didn't bother him. He stood and put his hand on the phone again.

He bought it, all right. "Yeah, we're on our way." Lopes sat back down and swiveled his chair away from the young men, facing the back wall and the crucifix. His elbow stuck out as he crossed himself.

Yeah, ask God for a sign, you bastard. Phillip followed Warren out the door.

"You better get off this property now, or I'm calling the cops," the secretary said, but Warren had already pulled the door open and was ducking through the entrance.

"Go file your nails; we're gone," Phillip said with a snarl and walked out behind Warren, who was negotiating the wobbly stairs.

Phillip grabbed the railing with both hands and vaulted himself

over the two-by-four all the way to the ground, just a few feet from the white Cadillac. His face felt warm, flushed; there was a high-pitched hum in his ears, and his neck throbbed.

Man, buzzing like crazy. “Warren, I think I’ll lower the price on this junker.” He took out his Swiss Army knock-off. “If he can pull a gun on us, I can decorate his car.”

“Put that damn thing away,” Warren said, but Phillip flipped out the corkscrew and extended his arm to a back door. Just before the knife touched the paint, he pivoted around.

“Gotcha!” Phillip yelled, laughing as he lowered his arm.

“Shit, Phil, that’s enough.” He turned toward the office to be sure no one was watching them.

“C’mon, you knew I wouldn’t do it.”

“Jesus, just be quiet.” Warren took the knife, and pushed him toward the pickup. “After last night, I wouldn’t put anything past you.”

“You mean Mick? That’s different; he’s fair game. Ya’ know, I’ve wondered if dog turds would float in his swimming pool; I think it’s time to find out.” He took several quick strides as if they were the first steps to carry out his plan.

“Good, keep moving.” Warren checked the trailer again.

A shudder crept up Phillip’s spine, his exuberance waned and he walked slower. *What the hell?*

“Your keys,” Warren said, catching up at the gravel road.

The coldness was settling into Phillip’s head; he put his hand to his temple. *That weird chill again.* “What, Warren?”

“Give me your damn keys; I’m driving.”

“Okay.” He handed them over. *It’s colder.* “Let me get my coat.” Phillip walked to his pack in the truck bed, then climbed stiffly into the cab with his windbreaker. He zipped on the coat and pulled the flimsy hood over his head. Warren drove off, tossing over the knife. Phillip picked it up and focused on the white shield imbedded in the red plastic.

So cold. Hunching away from Warren, Phillip began to trace the

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knife's emblem with the tip of his forefinger. *That's good, do it again; it might help.*

Warren turned right at the gate, drove a few miles, then pulled off into a wooded turnout and killed the motor. Phillip still stared at the knife, his finger moving over the design. Warren looked at him but waited before he spoke. "Phil?"

"What?" He sat up, the knife in his palm.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be all right." The chill had subsided but he felt drowsy.

"Then put that damn thing away."

Phillip gaped at the knife. It seemed incongruous in his hand, and too heavy for its size. *Why was I doing that?*

"You look like you need some rest, Phil."

"Yeah." He slid the knife into his chest pocket.

"I could use a few more Z's," Warren said, pretending to start another nap. He saw Phillip put his head down, close his eyes and fall into an agitated slumber. Warren watched the forest until Phillip woke up about twenty minutes later.

"Phil, let's bag the hike and start back."

"Whatever you think." He stared at the trees as the pickup turned around and headed for town. After a couple minutes, Warren asked if he felt better.

"I'm fine." He was sitting up straight and had removed the hood. The knife in his shirt pocket seemed to weigh on his neck; he moved it to his jeans. "I guess that was pretty weird at the ranch—sorry," he said, looking at some mountain daisies by the road.

"No skin off my nose, but it was off the wall. So what was the deal with the albino mountain lion?" Warren asked, shaking his head.

Yeah, what was it? "I was only trying to scare him a little at first, but the gun thing pissed me off."

"I'm not so sure there was a gun."

"I'd bet on it. I got carried away after that; you backed me up pretty well," he said with a hint of accusation.

“You knew I wouldn’t let you hang, even if it was nuts.”

“The truth is a cougar wouldn’t come anywhere near a busy place like that. It wasn’t all BS; there really are albinos. They’ve been spotted in the Sierras, near Reno.”

“Sure, Phil, just over the hill. What I don’t get is why he didn’t laugh right in our faces; he ate it up.”

“Remember those people in Sageview a few years ago who swore the devil was at a church dance; said they saw his cloven hoofs? This guy’s that superstitious.” His gut gnawed as Warren slowed for a logging truck leaving the ranch. “Speak of the devil,” Phillip said, glaring at the semi.

“Yeah, well, you’re confronting people left and right. It isn’t like you.”

Phillip noticed his loose seat belt, pulled it across his lap and buckled it. “Maybe it is like me,” he said quietly. *Tell him about Stephen?*

“I don’t buy that, Phil, but when you tell people off this is how it is—they get pissed; you have to expect it. So you scared the living crap out of him, serves him right, but was it worth it?” He passed an old war-surplus Jeep and shifted into fourth on the straight stretch into the valley.

“What do you mean?”

“Your revenge didn’t change anything, so it better feel pretty damn good.”

“It did then, but now it feels like I scared some little kid who thinks a tree is a monster or something.”

“I knew it. When he finds out you jerked him, he blows it off and you have all this regret; he wins. Before you take on somebody else, decide if it’s worth it. If it isn’t, then *you* blow it off before you say anything. End of sermon.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Phillip looked out at Blue Valley, flush with wildflowers. *I should’ve stayed here.*

“You want to stop here again?”

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“Yeah, thanks, maybe a couple minutes at the other end.”

“Phil, when we talked about your confrontations this morning, you held back; you want to give it a shot now?”

Go on. “I told Stephen off again right before he died.” He spoke slowly with pauses. “Like you said, I didn’t think first. The last thing he told me was go to hell, and I busted the damn phone. He wouldn’t have tried to drive if I—”

“Wait a minute, you can’t blame yourself for that.”

“I told him straight out to sober up; he drove off to spite me. I shouldn’t have pissed him off.” Phillip’s ulcer constricted a little.

“It wasn’t your fault, Phil. Look, it’s not as simple as you make it out. You couldn’t know everything that made your dad tick, and like you said last night, Mick made things worse. You have to stop feeling guilty about it.”

“It’s not a feeling. I did it—cause and effect. I don’t feel anything.”

“You sure as hell feel the anger. When you’re up at your project, you can mellow a little; sort some things out.”

“Yeah, maybe I will. Another reason I’m ready to go.”

15

Leaning on the Chevy's trunk, Phillip watched Warren drive away. A light ash cloud trailed the Beetle like grey exhaust, as if the perfectly tuned little engine were burning oil. Before he left, Warren asked again if he was going to be okay, and Phillip reassured him, promising to call before leaving for the mountains.

Warren's car disappeared around the corner. *There he goes. So? He's got his own life; you can't bleed him dry.* Phillip left the pickup in the driveway and started across the lawn. As he walked, he saw the grass had hardly grown above the ash residue. *Needs water.* Nearing the ponderosa, he noticed something glistening on its trunk and was about to make a close inspection when he heard a faint ring through the open kitchen window. *Looks like sap—get the damn phone.*

Phillip ran to the door and opened it. *Slow down, you're not going to make it, anyway.* He dropped his pack in the hallway and walked to the den; the phone was still ringing. Ali followed him and jumped up to stretch out on the cool glass of the pinball machine as Phillip lifted the receiver.

Probably the lawyer. "Hello," he said, his tone surly.

"Mister Stark?" a high-pitched woman's voice asked.

"Yes." *What are you selling?* He massaged Ali's ears.

GREY PINE



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“Good, I caught you, I was about to hang up. You’re hard to reach,” she said, sounding annoyed about wasting the time.

“I’ve been out a lot. Who is this?”

“Sorry. Phyllis Meisner, I’m an instructor in Doctor Putman’s department; she asked me to call.”

Phillip stood straight. “Uh, right, sure.” *This is it!*

“I’m calling to update you on the status of the proj—”

“Status? I thought you were calling about arrangements.”

“Not yet, but we’re still planning to go ahead.”

“That’s great!” he said with more zeal than he intended.

“We appreciate your enthusiasm, Mister Stark.”

You’re a dipshit, Mister Stark. “Sorry uh, I, it’s Phillip.”

“Yes, as you know, we’ll be in the northern range away from the ash, which is why we’ve been able to hang on this long. But we’ve had some movements of staff to help other departments with zoological issues related to the volcano. Unfortunately there will be a delay, and then we’ll probably have to cut it to six weeks. I’m sure you understand.”

Damn. “Of course. How long of a delay?”

“We hope only about a month.”

Early July, that cuts it close. “When will you know?”

“We’ll try to contact you within three weeks, one way or the other. Sorry I don’t have better news right now. So that’s it, unless you have other questions.”

“No, I’ll be expecting your call; I’ll have my phone on.”

“Excuse me?”

Dumb. “Nothing, thanks for calling.”

“Thank you, Phillip. Good bye.”

“Bye.” *Your amazing volcano is screwing the project. Still a chance for six weeks; that’s extra time for Lupe. First apologize, then tell her about the delay; it’s what she wanted; maybe it’ll get you out of the doghouse.*

He called Lupe’s parents and got the machine, so he tried the apartment and she answered.

“Hi, Lupe; I’m surprised I caught you there.”

“Just got back; I was about to call you.”

“Lupe, I’m sorry for how I spoke to you last night.”

“Thank you, Phil, I appreciate that.”

“I’m not going to use booze as an excuse; I knew what I was doing, I was wrong.” *Not about Mick.*

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. I obviously had no idea of the intensity of what was going on between you and your father. I’m not sure I can even begin to understand the emotional trauma you experienced.”

Geez, pretty heavy. “Uh, that’s old news now. I have something else to tell—”

“I don’t agree that it’s old news, Phil. I think we both need a little time to process everything.”

What? “Go on.” *She is dumping me.*

“Well, I never did talk to you yesterday, so here goes: I’m taking an opportunity that came up. Dad has some business in Central America; he asked me to interpret for him, and I’ll get to see my other family in San José.”

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Yeah, and your brother, Enrique.

“Phil?”

Whose idea, hers or her dad’s? “When do you go?”

“Day after tomorrow, but I’ll be back in three or four weeks. Since you’ll be in the mountains anyway, it’ll be a good break for both of us.”

“You’ll get back about when I’m supposed to leave.”

“What do you mean?”

“The research was cut back and postponed until July.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Phil.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“No, why would I want that?”

“Messing around this summer sounded real important.”

“Do you think I’m that selfish? You weren’t listening, and neither was I. We need this time to think.”

Bull. “Why don’t you just admit you want to break up?”

“I’m not saying that. Listen, Phil, you know I care—”

“Okay, then before you go, maybe I can see you a minute.”

“I don’t think that’s best right now.”

“You aren’t being straight with me, Lupe.”

“Yes I am, but you obviously don’t believe me.”

“Then let’s deal with it. I’ll meet you downtown.”

“No, Phil, this isn’t getting us anywhere.”

“That’s such bullshit, I don’t see why you can’t—”

“Phil, I’m sorry,” she interrupted, “I’ll write to you.”

“No, don’t, I already know what you’re going to say.” He dropped the phone to its cradle. “Shit, shit, shit!” he said, each expletive louder and more intense. *Goddamn her.* Phillip kicked a leg of the pinball game with his heel, startling Ali.

Don’t take it out on him. He petted the cat, Ali started to purr, and Phillip led him to the kitchen. He put a few kibble treats into a bowl, and then stood up to rub his aching eye sockets; he heard Ali crunch on the food.

She didn’t mess everything up; it was you, jerk-off. Think about

something else. He looked down at his cat. "Guess it's just you and me and this damn house, Ali." *Nobody left to piss off.*

Phillip turned and stared out of the kitchen window at his well-scraped front yard. Though the wind hadn't blown for days, the dun-colored air still screened out much of the sunlight. A tinge of the strange cold sensation crept into his head; he saw his reflection. He put his finger on the glass and traced the shadowy image, his body moving slightly back and forth. The coldness didn't get stronger, so he kept moving his finger over the window.

Minutes later, Phillip's trance was broken when he saw his tree glisten again. Oblivious to what he was just doing, he rushed out the front door and into the yard. Parting two of the larger middle branches, he looked in at the trunk of the young tree. Just below the main fork, the bark was encased in thick ochreous sap and some kind of white ooze.

What is this? After checking the rest of the trunk and finding no more of the sticky mess, he hurried back into the den and looked up the number of Ponderosa's only nursery.

"Nora's Greenhouse, this is Chipper," a man said with the perky demeanor that probably earned him his nickname.

"This is Phillip Stark, I have a—"

"Stephen Stark's boy, sure. Sorry I couldn't make the funeral, son . . ."

You weren't the only one.

". . . want you to know I don't pay no mind to gossip. Far as I know, your dad was always sober in this store, yup."

Yup, more like hung over.

"So what can I do ya' for today?" Chipper asked when he realized Phillip had nothing to say about Stephen.

"Something's wrong with my pine tree."

"What kind is it?"

"Ponderosa."

"That's likely your problem right there."

"Why is that?"

"Nobody bothers with 'em much anymore. I'll stop selling

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ponderosas eventually. Mainly we sell Austrians now. So what's wrong with the tree?"

"Globs of sap and some white stuff."

"Right where some main branches come apart?"

"Yes."

"Pine borer; he's right in the crotch of that tree, happy as a clam. The white stuff is his waste; you got all that sap 'cause it's like the tree is bleeding. I've dug a couple of 'em out with hangers, but that's not a real fix."

"Then what can you do about it?"

"Chop it down, especially if you've got other pines."

"It's the only one I have."

"I'd still cut it down."

No way. "There must be something I can do."

"Austrian's more resistant to the pine borer; a few young Austrians would cost less than fooling with a sick ponderosa." Chip waited a moment for a response but didn't get one. "You have one shot, and there's no guarantee it'll work."

"I don't care. What do I do?"

"The co-op in Four Rivers has this fancy insecticide that kills the moth that makes the grub . . ."

How toxic? He stroked the cat once; Ali didn't move.

". . . doesn't even look like a moth, more like a wasp. That stuff kills it before it can lay eggs."

"Is it toxic to animals?"

"Not sure. The B.I.A. foresters on the reservation dust all that timber there. It's pretty nasty stuff; I'd keep your animals in while you're spraying and get yourself a good mask. See what the co-op guy says. Five pounds is probably the smallest he's got, you'll need to ask how to cut it way down."

"What's it called?"

"Don't recall, not much need for it when the Austrian . . ."

It'll brown up and die—twenty bucks.

Try and collect it. I'll stop the sonsabitches.

"You still there, son?"

Damn. "Yeah, sorry. The co-op's on Fifth, right?"

"Yup. When will you be goin'?"

"Right now."

"That grub's got an enemy, I see that. I'll call and tell 'em you're coming and what you need. Good luck with it."

"Thanks." Phillip got his checkbook and was off for the city again, driving with determination, much faster than earlier in the day. He bought the insecticide and the clerk told him he could apply it as often as he wanted, but once a week was more than enough. He said it wouldn't harm animals or people as long as there was no direct contact.

From the time he called the nursery until he turned off the highway coming back to Ponderosa, Phillip was thinking mostly of saving his tree. He stopped at the feed-and-seed; bought twelve feet of chicken fence, steel poles and a heavy-duty mask. He left town and drove up onto the mesa, passing some fields that had yet to be plowed under. The stark countryside reminded him of Xavier Lopes running him off the same road.

Seems like a month ago. He came to about the same spot where he went off before. *I think that's the pole.*

Solid as a rock; always does the job.

You'd make everything so simple; nobody but Warren would even give a damn—doesn't even scare me. That's crazy shit, Phillip. He drove on home, scraped off the ponderosa, watered it and then sprayed.

Phillip finished erecting the fence around his pine before dark, then ate a banana and some tortilla chips while he did a load of wash and watched TV. His eyes began to droop and he was in bed by ten, trying not to think about anything that had happened or what he would do the next day.

A new nightmare kept him from any sound rest. It wasn't a lucid dream like the night before, only a hazy image of a Stephen-thing stalking through the yard, axe at the ready, in search of the ponderosa.

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The zombie returned again and again, like a continuous TV rerun with bad reception. The repetition eventually weakened the dream's ghastliness, it faded, and he fell into an uneasy sleep.

In the early morning he was conscious but didn't open his eyes. *Why don't you get up? And do what, scrape the back yard?* He felt the beginning of the cold heaviness in his head and avoided it by going back to sleep again. Later, when Ali pounced on the foot of the bed, Phillip sat up slowly, eyes open and fully awake. The old cat minced gracefully across the lumps in the covers.

"Hey, gato." Glancing at the clock on the bookshelf, he patted Ali on the head. *God, it's after eleven—more than twelve hours.* "Almost lunch time for you, no wonder you woke me up." The nightmares and everything else out of his mind, he stroked Ali's fur. "Let's get you some food, boy."

In briefs and tee shirt, he followed the cat down to the kitchen. As Ali devoured his brunch, Phillip looked out at another wan morning that should have been awash in sunlight. The dull day didn't bother him, but he glared at the hunks of sap, now dark yellow offal in the grass below his tree.

Get rid of that crap when you spray. He saw a branch of dry pine needles he didn't notice before. *The tree's probably had it.* The ulcer bit at his gut, reminding him to take the medicine. By the time he swallowed the drug with water, Phillip felt the strange coldness in his head again so he chased the first pill with a non-aspirin. He walked back down the hall to his bathroom sink and looked in the mirror.

Why does my head get cold like this? Maybe you can get rid of it here. Phillip traced his reflection with one finger several times. *Still numb; this isn't working. Just get moving, that'll stop it—go on.* He went back in the bedroom, picked up his work clothes and sat on the end of the bed, holding his shirt and jeans. *No, it's too cold. The carpet worked before.* Phillip wrapped both arms around his middle, the dirty clothes wadded between his forearms and stomach. He leaned forward and saw the pattern below.

Yes, here; you can get rid of it here. He followed the lines of the *fleurs-de-lis* again, looking down his nose. *Down and around, up again, in and then out, now down . . .* The chill persisted, but he continued to outline each bend and curve. His body began to dip with the motion, and soon his entire torso swayed. . . . *up and over, back and down—yes, that’s better. Stay here—up again and . . .* The monotonous movements continued for several minutes, even longer, for all he knew.

It’s gone; get dressed. No, still tired. He dropped his clothes on the floor and crawled back under the covers. *No way you can sleep any more. It’s okay, you’re finally comfortable, just rest awhile.*

After some relatively solid sleep, Phillip finally got up after two o’clock in the afternoon, put on his clothes and shoes and walked through the house. *Blew half the day, now what are you going to do?*

He sat on the edge of Stephen’s recliner, looked up at the blank TV screen and saw his reflection again. *Jesus, don’t look at that.* He focused instead on the old framed photo of Ingemar Johansson above the TV. He walked over to inspect it. *Black shoes, little gloves, short shorts, smug look on his face—the tough Swede, Stephen’s hero.* Phillip backed up and sat down again. *That picture’s been there forever—why does it seem like I’ve never really seen it?* He surveyed the familiar room, not sure what he was looking for. *What’s left of him? This damn chair, shop tools, the Chevy, Mom’s pictures, and Ingemar up there—maybe something in his room.*

He got up, retrieved the key from the hall closet, and walked over to the door across from his own bedroom. Since Stephen kept the room locked, Phillip couldn’t recall being in there more than a couple times since they used it for storage. He turned the key, entered and found everything in military order. The single bed was perfectly made next to an uncluttered dresser; a high-back wooden chair stood flush to the wall. On the nightstand by the bed there was only the reading lamp and a thin coffee-table book. The shade was drawn exactly halfway over the window, which faced the prevailing breeze and had been left open a couple inches. All of it was just as Stephen had left it, except it was filthy. A thin layer of fine ash covered every horizontal surface.

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He'd shit a brick if he saw this. Phillip closed the window, walked over to the closet, then turned and saw the trademarks from the bottom of his sneakers imprinted in the tracks on the carpet. He slid back the closet door and found only a dusting of ash on his father's organized shoes, shirts and pants. His army uniform and one old suit coat were hanging in dry-cleaning covers. Phillip lifted the plastic from the brown dress uniform and touched the corporal's chevrons and then the rectangle of colorful honors emblems above the left pocket.

Thought he got rid of this; could've put it in his casket. He had provided only one item for burial—Stephen's enormous, enigmatic South Korean flag to use as a shroud. After Mick asked for it at the wake, Phillip was gratified he had the flag buried with his father.

He shut the closet, then searched the dresser drawers, finding only socks, shirts, underwear, and shoe polishing paraphernalia. *Crap for Goodwill.* Phillip approached the nightstand and sat on the double bed, noticing that the pile ribbing in the bedspread's chenille design had mostly resisted the ash, and it snaked like a banana-colored maze over the smudge-grey background.

Phillip stared at the cover for several mesmerizing moments. *Follow the yellow brick road.* With the end of his index finger he slowly traced the curves of the soft piling until the track led his hand over the side of the bed. *Stop this—now!* He shook his head, trying to clear it, then reached for the book on the nightstand and brushed off the ash. *DECKS AND PORCHES STEP BY STEP—still interested.* The binding was stiff and it cracked as he opened it to a picture of some redwood planks. *He hardly even looked at it.*

Phillip replaced the book, pulled out the top drawer and found four items: a box of tissue, a face-down envelope, an old revolver and a box of cartridges. *What the hell?* He lifted the gun and checked the chamber. *Loaded—Jesus.* Phillip placed the firearm gently on the bed, then flipped the envelope over and found his name printed on the other side. He opened it and took out a one paragraph handwritten letter. *My God. From him or Stephen?*

Dear Phillip,

I wish you didn't have to deal with this. . .

It's Dad—deal with what?

. . . but I know I'm no use any more to you or anyone. It's hard to go through with it. . .

Kill himself, dear God.

. . . but since you're reading this, I guess I finally got up the nerve. I've hurt you again, I know, but this is the only way. Mostly I'm sorry for how I treated you since your mother died. I think in the long run this will be best for you.

Dad

Though he'd finished reading, Phillip glared at the note. *No, Dad wouldn't go through with it—Stephen just passed out.* The chill crept gradually up his back.

Sorry for how I treated you. How much was he aware of Stephen? Phillip dropped the letter back into the drawer, returned to the door and crossed the hall. He went directly to his bed and sat on the edge, his face partially covered by one hand. *If he could write that, he could've talked to me.* Shivers pressed into him between his shoulder blades.

You'll believe any of' bullshit.

"Shut the hell up," he said, tears bulging in his eyes.

Aw, are we going to cry about it?

Bastard. The coldness moved quickly to the top of his spinal cord and into his head. *At least I'm ready for it this time.* He wiped his face with his sleeve, then leaned forward to follow the contours of the pattern in the carpet. Phillip began rocking back and forth and was soon asleep.

The short nap ended when part of the Ali dream came back to

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him—the image of Mick sitting on his patio, laughing as Stephen was attacked. *Mick the goddamn prick.* He opened his eyes. *Like Warren said: remember, it wasn't all your fault.*

Peas in a pod—me and your ol' man was peas in a pod.

Too bad I didn't hit him, hard. Phillip sat up. *The chill feels close, like it's waiting. Crap, get up.* He stood, moved slowly out of his room and saw he'd left Stephen's door open. Phillip walked in and stared at the pistol on the bed.

Peas in a pod.

Yeah, you should be in his pod. He picked up the weapon and tested its heft, his finger on the trigger. *What the hell are you doing, Phillip?* He put the gun right back down, dropping it the last couple inches; ash puffed up from the bedspread. The chill started to kick in, and Phillip returned to his carpet again.

16

Wielding its axe in search of the tree, the Stephen-zombie haunted Phillip every night. The recurring dream vanished and reappeared so often that it became a dull respite between other nightmares. Sometimes images returned of Ali and the people in the store, or of Mick laughing at Stephen's slaughter, but Phillip was especially agitated by a new dream of Ellen Stark in the intensive care ward, asking him if he was taking care of his father.

Bizarre variations of those dreams and others prevented sound sleep most nights. He would finally catnap from about two A.M. to dawn and then wake up for a few minutes, waiting to see if the coldness shuddered in his head. It was always there, but he was able to go right back to sleep to avoid it. Phillip would wake at around noon to feed Ali, convincing himself each time that he was up for good. But he was soon at the foot of his bed ridding himself of the chill and then sleeping into the afternoon.

Days after he found Stephen's note, Phillip awoke as usual in the very early morning, but this time he couldn't go back to sleep. He sat up in bed, and the chill was there, stronger than the one he fought off the previous midday. *This one's a damn glacier—c'mon, you can sleep.* He started to lean back, but Ali came in and meowed, though his lunchtime was hours away.

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“What’s with *you*?” Phillip asked the cat. *Man, it’s so cold.* He struggled to get up, tossed out the cat and closed the door. *Now sleep it off.* He got in bed, covered up and closed his eyes for a few minutes, but he stayed awake and his head still trembled. *Crap, there’s no choice.*

He sat on the edge of the bed and assumed his usual posture for expelling the chill—elbows on knees, forehead in both palms. Phillip concentrated on the design between his feet and began to trace it. *Curve up, now down, and around. Curve out, to the base, now up. What’s wrong with me? In to the other side, small curve—it’s not getting better. It will—just shut up and do it. Around, straight into the slit, out, and back to the top, curve out, and down . . .* The chill eventually withdrew, and he finally went back to sleep.

Phillip woke up before twelve with mild ulcer symptoms. *At least the coldness is gone. That one counts, by God; the noon chill can go to hell.* He got up and walked confidently to the kitchen to put out the cat’s brunch. Standing at the sink in his underwear, he watched Ali eat, but a cold tinge crossed his nape. *No, fight it; don’t think about it.* He tried petting the cat and then looking at some bills, but the icy pall gradually descended upon him again. *Didn’t the first one mean anything?*

He dispatched an ulcer pill and a non-aspirin, but before he could return to his bed he had to stop in the bathroom. Phillip started to touch his reflection in the mirror. *That won’t work; take your dump and get out.* He lowered his underpants, sat on the toilet, and looked down at the plain linoleum for something, anything, to trace with his eyes. *Nothing there. It’s stronger—cold and heavy like this morning.* He draped a bath towel over his head for warmth, but it was so clammy he let it fall to the floor.

Phillip finished going and saw the dispenser was empty. *Damn.* He fumbled with the ends of the chrome holder, but it was jammed. *Still colder, can’t wait, you need the carpet now. No, idiot, wipe your ass.* He tried to separate the tube again, but it burst in his hands. “Shit!” he yelled as both pieces and the spring rolled across the floor. *Easy, just get*

some paper. He reached for the cupboard by the sink, but his arm seemed to move in slow motion, *Hurry up. There, open it.* Phillip pulled the glass knob, but the door didn't give. *It's stuck; pull harder. God, I'm so cold.*

The cabinet opened after two more tugs; he found the toilet paper in a new cellophane four-pack and picked it up. He was momentarily impressed by its unexpected bulk and then considered his next step. *Rip it.* He tried, but the plastic seemed tough as hide. He jabbed with his forefinger; it just bent at the knuckle.

Damn weakling. Can't wait, freezing. He leaned up for the tissue box on the sink and managed to sweep it back onto his lap. Only two thin sheets remained inside, and even they seemed too heavy. He reached under himself and did the best he could. A couple tears welled up in his eyes.

You're so pathetic.

Shut up, bastard. Phillip stood slowly, pulling up his briefs, though he wasn't completely clean. *Just get to the carpet.* Everything was blurred and moving slowly again as he made his way to the side of his bed. Staring at the pattern, he began to rock and swerve. . . . *around and in, now straight out of the slit—straight outta hell. Easy, this is the only way, keep going. Down and over, all the way to the top. This is where you need to be. Around the curve—that's better. Good, nothing else matters. Back down to the base, and up . . .* When the chill was finally gone, he was asleep again.

He woke up in the afternoon and lay there, anxious and still, staring sideways at the wall. *It's gone, whatever it is. Frostbite in the head—chilblain—no, **chillbrains.** Great, you named it, now get up.* He noticed the slight odor of excrement.

"Shit," he said to the wall. *Got that right—how could you be any more disgusting?* Phillip got up, walked into the bathroom, shed his underwear and turned on the shower. He waited for the water to get scalding hot. *Chillbrains—Jesus. What if you couldn't stop it?*

What Phillip couldn't stop that day or the days that followed was

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the routine he settled into: the early chill, the Ali-feeding chill, and then by his third waking of the day, usually after two o'clock, he could make himself get up. He would dress in his work clothes and head straight for the garage to prepare insecticide. If Ali was around, Phillip put him in the house, the cat door bolted. Next, he'd shake up what was left in the gallon sprayer, pump it up and then open the garage, heading for the ponderosa, nozzle at the ready. Sometimes he'd forget his mask and have to put his tee shirt over his face while he coated the branches.

A telemarketer called one day and interrupted his spraying preparations. Before Phillip got far from the phone, it rang again; it was the lawyer asking to come by for a signature. An hour later, he signed the document and asked the lawyer to use the mail next time. After the man left, Phillip went to the phone and turned off the ringer.

When he finished his spraying each day, he neglected the lawns but sometimes filled the bird feeder in the back yard. After the chores, Phillip would walk to the street for the mail and newspaper and then retreat to his recliner in the 'TV room. Except for bills with threats on the envelopes, he just tossed most of the mail onto a pile next to the recliner. When he bothered to open the newspaper, he'd read the main stories, then nap until he took a meal of sorts in the late afternoons. It was often cereal, or beans with cheese; sometimes he had spaghetti with plain sauce, or his favorite, some variation of a peanut butter sandwich.

He spent evenings in front of the 'TV, usually for nature or news programs, or he would read *All Things Wise and Wonderful*, the Herriot novel he was struggling with. Phillip paid attention to the 'TV or his book for an hour or so, then napped on and off until about eleven. He intended to watch the news but would only make it through the sports and then wake up in the middle of the *Tonight Show*. After Johnny Carson signed off, Phillip went to bed and dreamed fitfully most of the night, followed at dawn by his singular method of exorcising the chill; then he slept again before dealing with the midday chill and sleeping into the afternoon.

The tedium was interrupted only by an occasional early-evening

trip to Kurt's market in town. He dreaded the outing and soon decided to stock up on cat food, powdered milk and other staples so he didn't have to go so often.

Phillip fiddled with the accumulated mail one evening and found a letter from Doctor Putman's office near the top of the pile. *Never saw this. So? You wouldn't be any use to them anyway.* The two-page form letter was "to clarify information already given to staff in person or by phone." The field research, it said, would begin in September, pause for winter and start up again in the late spring. The letter described project details and there was a printed note at the bottom. It said they assumed Phillip had a conflict with the new schedule, but to call if he could somehow participate.

Yeah, no problem, I'll just quit my job. What job? How are you going to get your ass out of bed when school starts? Take it easy; there's time. It isn't getting any worse; maybe it'll start to back off.

In the days after he read Putman's letter, Phillip continued to have no dominion at all over the mornings, and his afternoons and evenings remained a sluggish progression of napping, chores, TV, reading, and nibbling at his food.

One afternoon after his post-chill slumber, he looked out the kitchen window at his tree. *Still alive—time for the bug juice.* By the time he gathered the equipment and opened the garage door, the wind started to blow. The ash was airborne again, but visibility wasn't as limited as before. *So skip a day; won't hurt.* He put the sprayer away and went into the TV room to pick up two tardy bills.

Phillip walked back outside, wrist over forehead to keep the particles out of his eyes. Down at the curb he extracted the Four Rivers paper from its tube then opened the mailbox and exchanged his outgoing mail with a typically meager delivery of advertisements and one bill. He discovered a small envelope, the kind used for thank-you cards, wedged into a thin glossy catalog.

What's this? Probably my Dear John from Lupe. Using the other mail to cover his eyes, he checked the letter. *From Joann; she has a new*

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address. What's she want? He hurried to the garage, discarded the ads into the trash and went in.

Phillip dropped the bill and newspaper onto the pile by the chair and walked down to the poolroom with the letter. He drew open the curtains and leaped back on the pool table, his slender rear end nudging ash-dusty billiard balls that hadn't moved since the wake. They rolled together and clicked behind him as he looked out at the wind. Thistle and tumbledustard skeletons swirled across the yard, and the deep rut he'd made out to the bird feeder was barely visible.

You're stalling; get it over with. He opened the yellow envelope and took out a card printed with bright sunflowers.

Dear Phillip, I've been trying to call you since the lawyer told me you didn't go to the mountains.

The nosy bastard.

I hope you're okay and there's nothing wrong.

Everything's just ducky, Joann.

I need to discuss what you said about the house. I don't need the money after all, but I want to explain things.

Her reconciliation with Richard the Nazi.

As you can tell by the address, there have been some changes here. Please call me as soon as possible.

Love, Joann

PS my new phone number below -

Crap, may as well be done with it. He slid off the pool table, moved over to pick up the phone receiver, then poked the number buttons. Instead of listening to the clicks, he checked to be sure the ringer switch was still off. *Be civil; you could even apologize. Maybe she won't even be home.*

“Hello.”

No such luck. “Hi, Joann.”

“Phillip?”

No, it’s Elvis. “Yes, Joann.”

“You got my note, thank God; I’ve been calling for days.”

With her big news. “Been busy. So you moved?”

“Yes, I’ll tell you about it in a minute. How are you doing, Phillip?”

He scratched his hairy check. *Obligatory question.* “I’m growing a beard. I look like a Civil War general, maybe Stonewall Jack—”

“Phillip, what happened to your project?”

“Postponed to the fall.” He lifted the base of the phone to the pool table so he could watch the wind.

“I know it meant a lot to you, that’s a shame.”

Thanks for your sincere empathy. He said nothing.

“So what’s been going on?” she asked, trying hard to be cheerful.

“Just catching up on things.”

“What are you doing to keep busy?”

Nothing. “Let’s see, thanks to Carter I won’t be watching the Olympics; there’s still ash to clean up; I read a lot and take care of Ali.”
And the goddamn chillbrains.

“I’m glad to hear he came back. Are you hiking a lot?”

Out to my tree, every day. “Is there something you want me to do, Joann?”

“No, just asking, I don’t mean to be nosy.”

Well, you are. He jumped back onto the table, bumping the billiard balls again. Joann broke the silence.

“Are you taking care of yourself, Phillip?”

“Yes. You sound like Lupe.”

“How is she?”

“Fine, I guess.” *Yeah, like you don’t miss her.*

“What do you mean?”

“She’s with her father.” *And Enrique.* “On a trip.”

“Aunt May and I chatted with her while we waited for the taxi. I

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like Lupe, Phillip, but even if I didn't, it was wrong to say what I did in the garage."

What? He didn't respond.

"Have you spoken with Warren?"

"No, he thinks I'm in the mountains."

"You sure you're all right? The lawyer said you didn't look well when he dropped by."

Crap. "I'm fine; the lawyer's a damn snoop."

"It wasn't his fault. I asked him to check on you."

Why all the sudden concern? "Joann, did you need to tell me something or not?"

"Yes." She paused. "Since Daddy died, I've learned a few things about myself. I treated you and Daddy like, uh, well, terribly—all those years in my own little world."

Phillip heard her cry softly. *Good God, what is this?* "What do you want me to say, Joann?" He saw the wind dying down; the bleak backyard was nearly unveiled.

"Nothing. My behavior with you two was a big part of who I was; I regret it so much now, and I'm sorry."

Don't be so brutal, Phillip. "It's old news, forget it."

"I can't. And I'm sorry for the other things I told you at the funeral," she said, still sobbing a little.

"I remember what I said; I owe you the apology."

"Some of it I needed to hear. I'm the one who—"

"Okay, Joann, so we're both sorry. Tell me about your move." *And how dear Richard isn't really so bad.*

"I will, just a sec."

While she gathered herself, he watched a robin flutter down to perch on the fence. The chubby orange and grey bird took one look at the unpromising yard and then flew off for Mick's place.

"Phillip, I still think you should keep the house. Like I wrote, I'm not worried about the money. Richard and I—"

"So you worked it out with the bastard," he interrupted. "Don't expect congratulations from me."

“You’ve been right about him all along. The kids and I moved into a small duplex just inside city limits.”

“You did?”

“Yes. I finally came to my senses when he hit Joshua. My counselor helped me see I was fooling myself, thinking he’d be a good husband if I kept hoping and waiting. It was like I didn’t see the bruises on my own face.”

Jesus. “Jesus.” *As if you cared, Phillip.*

“I didn’t call to have you feel sorry for me. I’ve started divorce papers,” she said, her tone now intrepid. “I want it to be quick and amiable for the kids’ sake, but he’s stalling; the SOB.”

SOB? My, my. “Has he bothered you since then?”

“No, there’s a restraining order. He’s almost broke from his gambling so I don’t depend on him for anything except medical insurance. He doesn’t have visitation rights yet; there’s no reason for contact.”

“Good. If he shows up, call the city cops, not his county buddies.”

“Right. I have something else to ask you, Phillip.”

Here it comes. “Go ahead.”

“I want a new start with you. I’m building a new life for myself and my kids and I want my only brother to be a part of it.”

Why? “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I’d just like to give it a chance. We could begin maybe by calling at a regular time. Can we just see what happens?”

What the hell. “I guess.”

“How about every other Saturday morning?” she asked.

Fat chance. “I can’t do that; I have men’s league basketball then.”
Good one, Phillip.

“That’s wonderful, I’m glad you’re playing again. Let’s see, Sunday evenings maybe?”

“What’ll we talk about?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think it matters.”

“All right.”

“Thank you, Phillip.”

Change the subject. “So how are the kids adjusting?”

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“Naturally they’re upset, but I’m very proud of them. Grace has helped so much and little Josh is adjusting better than I expected. Guess what? After they’re in bed, I have a sitter and I’m playing four hours a night at a piano bar. And I’m taking a class at the college; if I finish my degree someday, maybe I’ll teach music. You’re my inspiration.”

Some inspiration. “You’d be good at it, Joann; you like kids, and your subject.”

“That’s such a sweet thing to say.” She sniffled again.

Brother. “So you’re surviving financially?”

She didn’t answer right away. “Yes. It’s funny, we’ve been living simply—no frills, and we’re making it on much less than I thought, even with all the inflation. Some of the so-called necessities don’t mean much anymore. We’re like the Flintstones—you know, washing dishes by hand, opening cans with dinosaur teeth.”

He chuckled. *A joke no less. Tell her what’s happening to you. No, this isn’t about your little problem. You didn’t help her with that creep—now’s your chance.*

“Phillip?”

“I’m here. Sounds to me like you need some money.”

“Between my job and piano lessons we’re making it, really. And the bank already sent me half of Daddy’s savings; that’s our emergency fund. You got your half, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.” *I guess.* “You sound good, Joann. I’m, uh, glad you’re doing okay.” *You are glad for her, jerk.*

“Thank you, Philly. It’s like a new life.”

Philly again. So what? “Joann, I’m still going to sell the place and send you half, more if you want it. It’ll be ready to go after I finish the ash and a few repairs.” *Look at that damn yard.*

“All I really want from the house someday is the piano.”

“It’s your piano.” He put one hand around a billiard ball. “Uh, Mom would be impressed you’re playing.”

“Yes, bless her heart.”

God, like she’s still alive. “I can’t believe how much has happened with you in just a couple weeks.”

"It's been over a month since the funeral, Phillip."

How could that be? He rolled the striped yellow ball into a pocket.

"Can we talk about Daddy a little bit?" she asked.

No. "I don't have anything to say." He watched a dime-sized jumping spider jitter across the ceiling.

"At the wake you tried to tell me how bad his drinking was. You made it sound like he was two different people."

"You still don't believe it?" he asked defensively.

"I do now; it was just another lie I was living. I'm sorry you had to deal with all that without any help from me."

"Forget it—more old news." He leaned back on the table.

"Yes, that's why I'm hoping we can have a new start."

Such drama; you think you can trust her? The arachnid stopped right overhead; he saw its red thorax.

"Phillip, did you see the autopsy report?"

"No. Why bother?"

"Daddy was sober at the time of the crash."

"What do you mean?" He looked down, trying to stifle his exasperation. "You just told me you understood how he was."

"Yes, but they said he wasn't legally drunk."

No way; it had to be Stephen.

"They tried to call you after the wake, Phillip; I told them you were gone. An investigator wanted to know Daddy's doctor, but I said he hardly ever went—right?"

"Never, but get to the point."

"He asked me if we thought he was ever suicidal."

Jesus. "What did you say?"

"No, of course. Their final decision was he just went to sleep. It's all in there."

My God, it was Dad. He looked up and saw the spider skitter away. *Pissing Stephen off had nothing to do with it.*

"Are you okay, Phillip?"

"Yes. This isn't what you think, Joann."

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“You don’t believe the autopsy?”

“I believe it. Hang on.” He hurried through the house, retrieved Stephen’s letter and came back to the den.

“I’m back,” he said, sitting on the desk. “Listen.” After a deep sigh, he read the grim note; then they were both quiet a few seconds. “There was a loaded gun with this.”

“My God,” Joann finally said, weeping as she spoke. “It must have been awful—for years.” She paused. “Give me a sec, please.”

“Take your time.” *Did he have something like the chillbrains, something worse? You were a big help.* He waited several more moments before Joann came back.

“Phillip, can we talk about this more on one of our calls?”

“If you need to.”

“Thank you, Philly. Now don’t get upset, but I’m still worried about you. Promise to take care of yourself?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. I’ll get going now; I saw the kids coming. By the way, my little bird watcher, Grace, wants to know you better. So does Josh.”

“One thing at a time, I guess.”

“Yes. Call you Sunday after next, about eight, okay?”

“All right.”

“Bye, Philly.”

“Bye, Joann.” *Do you buy all that? What the hell, just sell the place for her—gives you something to do.*

Phillip got off the desk, looked at the phone and decided to switch on the ringer. He went right out and gathered his ash-scraping implements, tossed them in the wheelbarrow, and rolled everything toward the back yard. After opening the back door of the shop, he crossed a perfect line of soot that had built up on the weather stripping. As in the front yard weeks before, the six-inch mass of ash and the imposing mounds below the eaves seemed to dare him to begin.

No time like the present. At first, he fell easily back into the rhythm of the work, rolling each load through the shop and the garage and then

down the driveway to start new piles near the curb. After his third trip, he had to stop out front. *What the hell? My arms hurt, and my back—just stop a couple minutes.*

He walked over to the front porch, sat down and surveyed the yard. *What a mess.* The walkways were dusted with ash from the wind, and the straw-colored lawn had two survivors—his pine and the ginkgo tree. The lilacs and the arborvitae looked to be dead or dying. *Can't sell it like this.*

Phillip grabbed the front hose and set up the sprinkler at the far end of the yard, next to Mister Beck's adjoining lawn. He watched the water splatter onto the dry turf, a tiny puff of ash bursting from each drop. *Wonder if it'll green up.* He stared until the ground was wet; his eyelids grew heavy. *You can't be sleepy; get back to work.*

Phillip made himself trudge to the back yard for his push broom, then came back out front and began to lethargically sweep up the wisps of ash on the front walks and driveway. *Move it, you slug.* As he labored with the simple task, he recalled the boundless energy he had while hosing the ash off the streets with his neighbors. *All night long.*

When he finally finished, Phillip looked at the withered lilac bushes he freed from the ash weeks before. *Take me forever to dig them out.* On hands and knees with a trowel, he unearthed one broken bush and was surprised to find it still had supple roots. By the time he reburied the plant, dug moats around the rest and flooded them, it was early evening. *Plenty of light—do some more in back. Too tired, you'll put a big dent in it tomorrow.*

Phillip returned some tools to the back yard, then went in for a shower. After that, he fixed some cereal, carried the bowl to a TV tray and turned on the set, hoping for a nature show. He settled for a *Taxi* rerun, ate some of his skimpy dinner, then leaned back in the recliner and was soon asleep. He woke up after one and shuffled to his bedroom. As was now his habit, he intentionally closed the door to keep Ali out.

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At dawn the next morning, the chill was there, but for the first time in many days Phillip went back to sleep without having to fight it off. When he got up at noon to feed Ali, he wondered about the early-morning reprieve, but the icy prostration descended upon him before he could even go out.

That afternoon he woke up feeling some of his old energy as he walked over to the bedroom window and looked out at the calm day and the deep ash. *Should've been working. The morning chill was weak; maybe it is starting to back off. Get up earlier tomorrow or you'll never be ready to sell the place. You're wasting time; move it.*

After dressing, he went straight to the garage and then the front yard to spray his tree. Finishing that, Phillip checked the salvaged lilacs and turned on the sprinkler. He started on the back yard again, stopping frequently to stretch his sore muscles. After an hour of hard work his stamina was gone, so he took off the gloves and rested on the patio step where he'd first watched the ash fall back in May. Not even half the ash below the eaves was removed, and the yard itself was still buried.

Great. Maybe I'll finish by Christmas. He managed another half hour of on-again, off-again work. That night, pledging to get up earlier, he set his alarm for nine A.M.

Phillip woke up groggily around six with the chill and had to use the carpet to get back to sleep. He was out of bed when the alarm sounded three hours later.

All right, you did it; now get moving. He put on his clothes and went right to the kitchen, looking for the cat. *It's only nine, dimwit; he's out.* After a few steps toward the garage, the phone rang. *That's what you get for leaving it on.* He walked to the den and gruffly answered the call.

"Stark?" It was his six-year nemesis, the principal.

Great. "Yes."

"I just got back and heard about your father, my condolences."

"Thanks." Phillip fidgeted with the phone cord.

"I need to touch bases with you, Stark."

So much for condolences. "Okay." *He wants something.*

"Varsity basketball camp was postponed to mid-August; they want you to help out. I also happen to know they're sniffing around for a new assistant. The camp will do you some good, considering everything; a few bucks in it, too."

Thanks for thinking of my welfare—no frigging way. "Thanks, but I'm still dealing with some family things."

"I understand, but there's time to think about it."

"I won't be able to do it."

"I already told the varsity coach—"

Shit. "Afraid that's your problem; I can't do the camp."

"Can't or won't? Ya' know, Stark, you'll never coach at that level unless you're more of a team player."

Team player, my ass. "Not interested in high school."

"I suggest you think it over; I'll send the schedule. The other thing is I don't have your commitment letter."

Must be in my pile. "Haven't seen my mail in a while."

"Okay, send it in; we want them by next week."

"Are negotiations over with the association?"

"No, they haven't quite settled, but they will soon."

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"I'll send it when there's a contract."

"I didn't think you were the union type, Stark."

"I'm not, but I won't break ranks on that."

"I'll overlook your attitude because of the situation—"

"Is that all you have for me?" *I've got grass to water.*

"Think about things, Stark. I'll be in touch."

Phillip heard the call disconnect then hung up and turned off the ringer. *Try calling me now, asshole.* He started for the kitchen, but his stomach reported in with a biting pang and the chill shuddered up his back.

No, it's too early for the second one. He placed two non-aspirins and his ulcer pill on his tongue and took them with tap water. Standing with his back to the sink, Phillip covered his face with both hands for several seconds, but the cold pounding moved to his head. He made it down to his room, stopped the chill and slept until twelve fifteen.

All right, now stay up; you've done your time—two's the limit. A couple hours head start is better than nothing. He got up and walked down the hall toward the kitchen, Ali flanking against his legs.

"Lot to do today, gato." He pattered with the dishes then put down Ali's food and reached for some cookies to take outside. The slightest hint of the chill moved up his spine, and he put his arm down. *No, it doesn't get to come three times; think about something else.* Phillip stood at the sink, closed his eyes, and for some reason recalled an insipid TV commercial for air conditioners. He remembered a caricature of a dog with a sweaty human face sticking his upper torso into a freezer; the dog pulled out his head and it was transformed into a blue ice cube with a big frown.

Crap, this is real helpful. He looked at the floor; the chill strengthened. *Come on; hold it off or you'll be asleep again.* He scooted the footstool over, sat down and stared at the flecked linoleum, trying to find a pattern he could follow, but his vision clouded and his head pulsed as if he'd been eating ice cream too fast.

Just get to the carpet—but you're going to stay awake this time.

Steadying himself with one hand along the wall, he walked to his room. *I'll only need a few minutes.* Like so many times before, Phillip traced the whirling lines of the *fleurs-de-lis*. *Yes, this is good—around the curve—this is what you have to do—over and around, up to the top—what you want to do—then down and . . .*

He woke up on his back and touched his chin to his flannel shirt. *Still dressed, you just dozed. It's gone; now get to work.* Phillip turned to the clock on the shelf. *Two ten; it can't be.* He started to re-tie his shoes. *Frigging chillbrains—you can't fool with it.*

Over the next days Phillip was locked back into his rut, but he kept trying to work in the yard when he could. One afternoon he got up to stay after two and walked into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. He preened through his long, dark-blond hair, then palmed both hands over his beard. *Behold, the hermit. Not funny.* He went down the hall into the kitchen and looked out at the yard; there was a green tinge to the lawn. *Finally, it's coming back. What day is this?* He checked the calendar on the kitchen wall. *The last week of June?*

He walked to the TV room and unwrapped the top newspaper from the pile. *July ninth. What happened to the Fourth, friggin' Rip Van Winkle? Seven weeks until school—good God. Should I explain the damn chillbrains to somebody?* He went back to the kitchen and started to peel a nearly black banana. It was so disgusting he discarded it, brought down some cereal and opened the fridge.

Call Warren, I guess. What'll you tell him? Hey, Warren, my head gets cold; I stare at my carpet and I sleep a lot. He took out the milk and found there wasn't enough for cereal. *Make some powdered. Sick of that crap; guess I'll go to the store tonight. Talk to Kurt—about what? You could talk to Senior; he was almost a pharmacist. Don't be stupid.* Phillip made and ate half of a peanut butter and pickle sandwich, then went out to spray his tree before returning to the back yard.

By five in the evening he finally finished the mounds under the caves but was too weary to start on the lawn. He came in, showered, and then put on a light flannel shirt and some relatively clean jeans.

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Phillip sat on his bed to put on socks and noticed the *fleur-de-lis* below. *Up, then around—no need to call anybody—and down—then over—what are you doing? Stop looking at it.* He tied his shoes, went to the kitchen and stared at the barren telephone bracket.

Lupe could be back; wonder if she'd talk to me? Maybe she could help. Screw that; I just want to see her. What if she told you to get lost? You'd deserve it. Maybe write a letter; apologize again. Great, get on your knees and beg while you're at it. Do something; this place is getting to you. Call Kurt—a little beer and BS can't hurt. He called the store and waited, holding the clicks away from his ear again. *He might not be on tonight.*

"Kurt's Western Grocery, this is Senior."

"Hi, Mister R., it's Phil." *Can I talk to you?*

"Hi, Phil."

"Uh—" *Something's wrong with me.* "Can Kurt get away?"

"Sure, he's just over in produce. How're you doing?"

Like shit. "I'm fi—"

"Good, I'll get him."

"Thanks." *How are you doing? Just empty words.*

"Kurt," Kurt Junior said, aggravated by the interruption.

Good ol' curt-Kurt. "It's Phil."

"Phil, he didn't say it was you. Glad you called, been wantin' to talk . . ."

This was a dumb idea; think of a way out.

" . . . off at eight. Let's go for a brew."

Let's see, save me some fruit. "Uh, I don't know."

"Why not, you doin' somethin'?"

"Just tired; been working on the ash all day."

"Still? I thought you'd be the first one done."

"I haven't had time."

"Horseshit—you're on vacation. C'mon, it's Saturday night; have a little fun for Christ's sake."

What the hell. "Where do you want to go?"

"That's better. There's a party at Tom's 'Tav."

Washed up Ponderosa Panthers—I'll pass. "I need some things at the store; I'll just be over when you get off."

"That'll work. Hold anythin' for you?"

"Yeah, some fruit. Any good bananas left?"

"Sure, what else?"

"Half of a Hermiston melon, if you've got it."

"Yup. That why you called, to have me hold fruit?"

"Yeah, thanks, see you in a while."

"I'm buyin' the beer. See ya'."

Phillip hung up. *Kurt's buying; there's a first—he's up to something. Farm house—you had to talk to somebody.* He had an hour to kill, so Phillip opened some Spanish peanuts, turned on the TV, leaned back in his chair and realized he was sitting on something. He pulled his baseball hat out from under his rear, smacked it on his knee and watched the ash dissipate before he put it on. He half-listened to a special about Afghanistan and the boycott of the Russian Olympics.

Sixty-five countries out. We didn't even boycott Hitler's games. The moderator introduced two senators and they began a droning debate for and against the policy. In a few minutes, Phillip was asleep.

He woke up and looked at the clock on the bar. *Damn—eight twenty.* When he snapped down the recliner, the peanut can toppled off the armrest and rolled toward the kitchen. Scores of brown nuts ricocheted all over the linoleum like tiny billiard balls after a break in eightball.

"Damn it," he said, and then got up, stumbling to the kitchen, peanuts crunching under his shoes. *Son of a bitch, sleep through everything. No phone in here, idiot.* He walked to the den, made the call, and Kurt Junior answered this time.

"I'm sorry, Kurt; I'll be late."

"Still finishin' up; no problem."

"Fell asleep in front of the TV—I'm sorry," he said again, as if he'd committed some serious transgression.

"Jesus, Phil, everybody does that."

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"I, uh, I—" *Do it all the time.*

"You all right?"

No. "Yeah."

"Come on; we'll put down a few in back, unless you want to go out."

"No, that sounds fine."

"Good, I got your fruit right here."

"Thanks; be right over." He hung up and started for the back door, crushing more peanuts as he crossed the TV room. *Clean that up before Stephen—shit, you expecting the zombie?* Phillip hurried into the garage, lifted the door, and then got in the pickup. He turned the key; there was no response. *Son of a bitch.* He tried again—nothing. He groped for the knob and found he'd left his lights on.

"Goddamn it!" He heard his loud oath reverberate in the steel frame of the small cab. His stomach clenched and he reached into a pocket for his vial of emergency ulcer pills and took one dry. Phillip yanked the keys from the ignition, got out of his truck in the semi-darkness and slammed the door so hard that Stephen's metal funnel fell off its shelf and clanked onto the concrete floor.

Tin piece of crap. He made a half turn toward the noise, swept his leg like a field-goal kicker, and the funnel took off straight out of the garage door and landed without a sound in the lilac bushes. *The kick is good, into the crowd; keep the damn ball.* "What a frigging madman," he said, and then walked over to the Chevrolet and got in behind the wheel.

Is that piece of Jap-crap still running?

Still running circles around this junker.

Then what the hell are you doing?

"Shut up; not going to drive it, just suck its juice." He popped the hood, then got out and turned on the interior garage light. Phillip took his jumper cables out of the truck bed and soon had the pickup running. "Take that, bastard," he said and backed down the driveway and into the street.

As he made the turn around the first corner, Phillip was aware of the chill beginning to rally at the back of his head. *Not this late; not*

here. Turn around. He pulled over to the curb and leaned back on the headrest for a couple minutes until the mild onset was gone. *Backed it off without the carpet—just go.* Focusing all his attention between the headlight beams, he drove slowly out of Ponderosa Estates, down the highway and into town.

18

There were only four cars in the lot as he pulled into Kurt's. Phillip got out and approached the store's front doors; they opened for him though it was after the nine-o'clock closing time. He walked through the entrance where he found Kurt Senior in his green apron counting cereal boxes at the first display in the nearly deserted store.

"Hi, Mister R.," he said, though most people called him *Senior*. Kurt Raihofer was a bit taller than his son, about Phillip's height; his face was pocked with old scars from the same skin problems that still plagued Kurt Junior.

"Hi, Phil. Kurt's finished; he's in back."

"Got a little shopping to do, if the till's open."

"Sure, take your time; I'll be here a while."

"Thanks." Knowing what he needed and exactly where to find it, he shopped quickly and soon returned to the front of the store. Kurt Senior met him at the one open check stand.

"Pretty quiet night, Mister R?" *Can I ask you something?*

"Yeah, for some reason. Good time for inventory."

"Uh—" *Maybe you could help me.*

"Something on your mind, Phil?" he asked, but Phillip shook his head. "He left your produce right here," Senior said, pointing to a bulging gunnysack.

As his groceries were being processed, Phillip checked the sack and found a bunch of bananas, six ears of corn, some peaches, oranges, grapes, and a whole watermelon. "This is more than I really needed."

"Yours is nine even, Phil, the produce is on the house—he paid," Senior said, skeptical of Junior's largess.

What's Kurt after? "Uh, thanks." He gave him a ten.

"Thank Mister Generosity." Senior handed back a dollar.

"Yeah. I'm going to put this stuff away." He went out to the pickup bed and put the milk and cheese in his Styrofoam cooler, then left the produce and other groceries in the cab. He walked back in then down an aisle to the swinging doors at the rear of the store. Phillip pushed with his palms; the louvered doors creaked and swung open like the entrance to a cantina in an old western. He'd forgotten the stark contrast between the bright, cheery market and the dingy concrete walls and stacks of boxes in back. *Same cruddy place.*

He turned left past carts of produce, made another left at the bathroom and approached the break room. Phillip saw it still had sheetrock walls, no door or ceiling, and a bare hundred-watt bulb hanging down from the steel beams above. A collapsible table and wooden folding chairs took up much of the space, and he could see the old avocado-green refrigerator and a rusted white stove, its surface caked with overflow from years of employees' meals. On one wall behind a pile of soiled laundry, a perpetually inoperative time clock endured next to a corkboard with fading notices. He saw new additions by the doorway: a scarred end table, a black phone, and a yellow directory scrawled with numbers and doodles.

Phillip walked all the way in, and at the far end of the long narrow room Kurt was intently focused on a magazine, his fingers holding it flat. The secondhand primary-school table was a tight fit even for the squat grocer, who had one leg sideways, his boot propped on a chair. Kurt's other hand was around a glass filled with brown liquid. There was a taller empty glass, then four cans of cola, some unopened corn chips, a small sack of ice, and a bottle poorly disguised by a paper bag.

GREY PINE

Kurt's cigarette smoldered in a fired-clay green ashtray, a crude project from somebody's forgotten art class. The smoke accumulated around the beams above.

"Hey," Phillip said, and Kurt looked up.

"Phil, you go back to sleep?" He sniggered and returned to his magazine.

Not funny, asshole. "Dead battery."

"Le' me finish this joke. Sit, have a drink," he said, eyes on his reading. Phillip grabbed the chair opposite Kurt, pulled it a couple feet back and sat down.

"What's hiding in the bag, Kurt?"

"Rum," he answered, his head still down.

On the page opposite Kurt's joke, Phillip saw a nude photo of a thin redheaded woman. "Rum n' Coke—pretty rank," he said.

"Horseshit. I don't get it," Kurt muttered at his magazine, closed it, and saw Phillip hadn't served himself. "Stead a' beer, thought we'd get a little shit-faced. Relax, Phil," he said in the ingratiating grocer's voice he could turn on and off at will.

He's almost wasted. "What about your dad?" Phillip waved smoke out of his face and tossed his dusty hat on the next chair.

"He puts up with it now I'm his partner. I'll pour." He smiled and dropped a handful of ice cubes into the empty summer tumbler. "A little Coke with your rum?"

"Lotta Coke, a little rum." He coughed from the smoke.

"You got plans or somethin'?" Kurt gurgled the liquor into the glass; it ran over the ice like thin maple syrup.

"No plans. That's enough," Phillip said, but was left with at least a double shot. "You gonna finish smoking that damn thing or just let it burn?" He nodded to the ashtray, and Kurt reached over and crushed the cigarette.

"There. Christ's sake, Phil—think you can relax now?"

"Maybe after you stop telling me to relax."

"Jesus, you do it." Kurt handed over the unopened can of cola.

Phillip pulled the tab and filled the tall glass to the middle, leaving the half-empty can at the edge of the table.

Back to a soft-soaping tone, Kurt grinned and said, "Drink up; I'm way ahead of you." He stood for a moment, undid his grocery apron and threw it on the laundry pile. "I got chips here. Need anythin' else?" He sat down, wiped a palm across the tormented blotched skin on his forehead and then checked his hand as if he might find blackheads.

"I'm fine." Phillip took a drink. *Aak—like rotten candy.* "Thanks for all the fruit, Kurt, that's a real good melon." *What'll it cost me?*

"Sure. Man, you wanna see melons, check these," he said, pleased with his joke as he pulled an advertising card out of the magazine. He turned the glossy page around and spread it flat.

Phillip glanced at the voluptuous blonde. "Nice," he said, watching the cigarette resurrect with a curl of smoke.

"Nice? Horseshit, they're wicked."

Barely looked at her. Phillip leaned over the table to show more interest. The buxom model was on her knees, head back to her heels. *She must be a damn contortionist.*

"Not so exciting after the beauties you've been around," Kurt said, clicking his tongue as he leered at the photo.

What? Ah, Lupe. "That's quite a shot all right," he said, nodding to the magazine as he sat down. *God, haven't been hard since—don't know.*

Kurt mixed a drink and downed two full gulps. "Word is you two are breakin' up."

"The *word* might be right for once; I don't want to talk about it." He took another swallow. *This crap is terrible.*

"Hell, I know your problem. Price is way up, but Bonnie's in town." Kurt smiled and raised his brows.

"Inflation strikes again."

"Horseshit; a seventy-dollar blow job won't set *you* back." Kurt laughed at his gibe. "So what's with the hair and all the fuzz on your face?"

"Growing a beard." He stared at a rusted mousetrap by the door.

GREY PINE

"I can see that. What's the deal?"

"Nothing, just felt like it."

"Man, you could use some meat 'n potatoes. Not turnin' into a damn hippie, are you?" Kurt grinned and drank again.

God, what the hell am I doing here? He picked up his glass and took a small sip.

"You hear about that jet crash in a big city in Poland?"

"Warsaw?" Phillip asked, looking at his glass.

"That's it; crashed into a cemetery. They can't get a body count because the Polacks keep countin' the skeletons."

Fell into that one. "Real funny."

"It is funny; you're so fuckin' serious. Shit, tell me what you been doin' with yourself."

Phillip sipped again. "Been busy." *I feel this crap.*

"Doing what?"

"Getting the house ready to sell."

"No shit? Where you gonna live?"

"Don't know. Probably rent a small place."

"Four Rivers?"

"No, probably out here, closer to the mountains."

"Christ's sake, you'll get big bucks from that house."

"What's your point?" Phillip held his glass on a cork tavern coaster as Senior walked in. The storekeeper put a doughnut box on the table then took off his apron and tossed it on the pile.

"I'm finished, Minnie. It's all locked up, just need you to wrap the laundry; kill these lights when you're done."

"Got it," Kurt said, pouring another drink.

Senior looked at the table. "I see you two have an exciting evening planned."

"Just shootin' the bull, Dad."

"Stay in the apartment tonight or your mother'll have my hide." The apartment was a small trailer they kept hooked up behind the store.

"Okay." Kurt rolled his eyes.

“Couple of good apple fritters left in there,” Senior said to Phillip, pointing to the white box on the table.

“Thanks Mister R.,” he answered, trying to smile.

“Well, good night.” Senior moved to the door. “Don’t drive, Minnie.”

“Yeah.” Kurt shook his head with contempt as his father disappeared around the portal. He waited for the squeak from the swinging doors. “Treats me like a goddamn kid.”

Treats you like a son. “Why does he call you Minnie?”

“What’s it to you?” Kurt’s eyelids were getting heavy with the oncoming stupor.

“Just wondered; you’d never tell anyone.” Phillip let his drink wash up to his lips, not ingesting any.

“Guess it don’t matter no more. My smart-ass brothers started it. When I was little, my gram sent me a stuffed Minnie Mouse; she thought it was Mickey. I’d take the damn thing everywhere, sleep with it, all that. Pete and Al called me Minnie from then on. My parents still think it’s cute.”

Fool doesn’t know what he has. Holding the pop can, Phillip pushed his mixed drink away from the edge of the table with the back of his hand. “If it’s so bad, why don’t you move out again?” he asked Kurt, then drank some plain cola.

“Alimony. Hey, we could room together in Four Rivers and commute; split the rent and shit. Man, think of the tail we’d get with our own place. What do you say?”

Over my dead body. “No, I’ll be out here somewhere.”

Kurt bristled at Phillip’s refusal. “Man, you’re nuts, don’t even know how lucky you are,” he said, dribbling rum on his chin as he nearly polished off the drink.

“Tell me how lucky I am, Kurt.” *This should be good.* A diffuse sense of the chill tingled his neck and temples. *No, it won’t come now. What’s he saying?*

“ . . . got independence, steady job, cash comin’ outta your a-hole;

GREY PINE

then you can't hold on to the finest tits in the whole goddamn valley." He wiped his face with the sleeve of his western shirt.

"Yeah, that about sums it up—all the important stuff." Phillip crinkled the top half of the aluminum can.

"Don't pull that shit with me." Kurt poured straight rum over ice, sneering as he lifted his glass. "You and your fuckin' cats," he said, and downed half his drink.

Asshole. "Dogs and horses for you, right?"

"Yup. I can take or leave the rest, or shoot 'em." He laughed without smiling.

Nail him. "The fact is, Kurt, any cat could survive in the wild if it had to, and every little pussycat is smarter than that ugly pure-bred dog of yours."

"Horseshit; can't train a fuckin' cat to do anything."

"I thought you admired independence."

"In people." Kurt took another gulp of rum.

"Oh. You ever see a cat chase a car, or walk up and eat shit right off the ground, or just roll in it like your dog does every day?" The chill began to creep into the back of his head. *Damn, should never have come here.*

Kurt was finishing his drink. "So you hate dogs."

"No, I'll get one after I move." *It's colder.*

"You make no goddamn sense. Why the hell am I arguing with you?"

Why am I fighting with another damn drunk? "Beats me, Kurt." His ulcer twisted; he took out a pill and held it, watching Kurt put down his glass and push it away.

"Fuckin' rum makes me pissed; I better slow it down," Kurt said, feigning regret. "I, uh, want to ask you, uh . . ."

Ask what? Screw him; this chill is for real. He took his pill with the soda.

". . . uh, I know you don't want to talk about Lupe, but—"

It's stronger. Phillip couldn't focus on Kurt.

"What's wrong with you? You hardly drank nothin'."

"I'm not feeling good; I have to go."

"Hear me out," Kurt said. "I mean if, uh, I—"

"What do you want, Kurt?" He put the pop can down but lost hold of it and it rolled across the table. Kurt stood to trap the can, but liquid sloshed on his magazine.

"Shit, Phil." He snatched a towel from the laundry. "Fuck, it's ruined—damn things ain't cheap." Kurt dabbed at the photos as if they were precious documents.

"Sure, like you bought it," Phillip said, wincing from the chill as he stood. He took out his wallet and dropped a bill in front of Kurt on the table. "That'll cover it; I'm leaving." He put on his hat.

"Thanks; that'll buy a fuckin' newspaper." Kurt flung the towel away.

What? He saw the bill was a one. *Shit.* Moving stiffly, he took out a five and put it on the one. *It's worse; get to the carpet.* He took some wobbly steps toward the exit.

"Wait a minute, forget the damn magazine," Kurt said, putting a hand on the money. "I started to ask you, uh—"

Phillip stopped at the end of the table. "What the hell do you want?"

"If you break up, you think she'd go out with me?"

"Lupe?" he said. "Fuck you, Kurt." He made the last step to the door, his vision blurring more. *Damn, so cold.*

"Jesus, you don't have to get all pissed. I was just askin' in case," Kurt said from the doorway as Phillip staggered away, moving along the wall to steady himself. He heard Kurt shout, "Horseshit, fuck you, too."

Phillip made it out the back door, through the dark alley, then around the building into the dim lights of the parking lot. He got in his pickup and sat behind the wheel, his head pulsing. With the small flashlight from the glove box, he tried to find a pattern to follow on the dashboard.

This won't work—get home; there's no other way. He started the motor, buckled his seat belt out of habit and drove to the store's back driveway.

GREY PINE

Take it easy; you'll make it. Two cars sped by in the dark and there was plenty of room to turn, but he hesitated. *Idiots are going too fast—now the air has to clear.* He waited for more cars to pass until he was convinced there were no more in sight. He pulled onto the highway.

It's even colder—Jesus. Hunched over his steering wheel, Phillip drove so slowly that a young couple taking in the late-evening air gawked at him as if he were an old farmer struggling to make his way back home. He finally made it to the junction and turned onto the state road.

Phillip passed the city limits sign and squinted at the rearview mirror, his head freezing. *Nothing there, just blowing ash—go.* At the incline, the engine whined for the next gear, but Phillip kept it in second. After he made it onto the mesa, he shifted and picked up some speed. Through his clouded vision he tried to read the instrument panel, but the numbers didn't come into focus.

Slow down, you're making a big cloud. He braked without downshifting and the motor seemed to lug in time with the shivers in his head. *It's too strong; I can't make it.* On the opposite side of the highway he saw the back of a pedestrian walking toward the mountains. Surprised to hear the sputtering pickup, the hiker looked around the side of his frame pack, assuming there must be engine trouble.

Maybe he could help me. Sure, Phillip. His body writhed and he bent forward, hunching his shoulders again to ease the pain. He was looking at the road through the steering wheel when some headlights flared behind. He managed to sit up.

Can't pass me in this crap, not again. The driver of the other vehicle pulled into the left lane to go by. *Not this time, Mister X.* Phillip bit his bottom lip, shifted and then accelerated. He didn't realize his truck was off the crown of the road until he saw a utility pole straight ahead.

There it is. God, my head is so cold.

Always does the job. He stepped on the gas and collided dead center into the pole. On the other side of the field fence, Phillip couldn't see that one of his pickup's headlights haloed an ash-entombed bale of hay. The beam faded in the clear air and went out like a stage light.

T. Lloyd Winetsky



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Part Three

Church

*You exhort me to worship Him
In your gilded cathedrals,
But my temple is palisaded basalt—
Where I see Her
In blue lupine, brown lizards, summer rain
And the searching eyes of a curious child.*

From the collection, "Hell"
By T. Lloyd Winetsky

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Below a white ceiling and fluorescent lights, Phillip was aware of two objects on the wall in front of him; a two-foot terra cotta Madonna and a small off-duty television connected to a movable black steel arm.

The hospital again, Mom's going to ask about him. Why's the Virgin Mary up there? Dumb dream. My head itches. Thinking he was about to lift his left arm, he saw it was splinted and that an IV line pulsed into the other arm. *This is real, Phillip. Jesus, Four Rivers—Saint Lourdes.* A dark face stretched partway into his field of vision.

“So you are awake, Mister es-Stark?” the lady asked, almost whispering. “Do not be es-cared,” she said louder in her gentle voice, “and please try to not move the head.”

The chill at Kurt's—had to get home. Blowing ash, then frigging Mister X. Again? No way.

“*Cálmate,*” she said, straining to get her face to the center of the elevated bed; but he still couldn't see her well. “I am *María*, Mister es-Stark.”

So the arm's busted, my head is sore; feels like I've been slugged in the gut. He also felt a brace constricting his neck. “Do you know what happened to me?” he asked her.

“A car accident; they bring you here in the ambulance. It is good

you talk now, but please be calm.” Maria straightened up, disappearing from his vision. “*Momentito*,” she said, then came around to the other side of the bed and put her hand on his shoulder. When she touched him, he felt some of the apprehension leave his body. She pushed a button somewhere, the bed lowered and he could see her from the waist up by just moving his eyes.

Phillip guessed she was almost fifty and barely five feet tall. Like his girlfriend, she had brilliant black eyes, but Maria’s were almond shaped, and her sienna brown skin was shades darker than Lupe’s. Maria’s jet-black hair, braided into a thick pigtail, hung down out of his sight. She wore a yellow bow, the kind sold for gifts, on the collar of a snug pastel-green uniform that made her look chubbier than she was.

“Do you know what’s wrong besides this?” He lifted the plaster of Paris cast and saw Band-Aids and some scratches on his upper arm.

“You have a bad hurt on your head; that is all I know,” she said, her soothing palm now near his elbow. “But you will get better, they tell me this, Mister es-Stark. Now I must call the nurse to say you are awake.”

“Aren’t you a nurse?” His peripheral vision detected dim light from a window beyond the small woman.

“No, I help her today.” Maria reached over his shoulder to press a call button pinned to the bed, and he noticed her hand was calloused.

Hard labor, but her hands are soft. Why is she so nice to me? “Uh, Maria, did they say anything about this thing on my neck?” *Doesn’t even hurt.*

“It is precaution.” Her word sounded like *precaución*.

The IV aches; why do I need it? He separated his dry lips. *Aak, like cotton.* Maria put the back of her warm hand on his forehead. *Mom checked me like this.* She lifted her hand; he turned toward her, ignoring the neck brace. Maria’s cardboard nametag spelled out: MARIA N. HOUSEKEEPING in black label-maker script, as if the last word were her surname.

“It does not hurt to move your head, Mister es-Stark?”

“No, Maria. May I have some water?”

"I am sorry, I only can give you the ice." She scooped frozen chips from a water jug on his table and then carefully lifted the plastic cup to Phillip's lips.

"Uhm, thanb youb," he garbled, trying to smile.

"*Seguro que si. More?*"

He nodded, and she shook in a few chips. As he sucked on the ice, she gently parted Phillip's dark blond hair from his forehead.

"You're very nice, Maria, thank you." His temples and cheeks flushed.

"*No es nada, Mister es-Stark.*"

Though the only physical similarity between Ellen Stark and Maria was their short stature, Phillip again thought of his mother. A couple of tears swelled in the corners of his eyes. *Stop, you're embarrassing yourself.*

"You have much pain?" she asked.

"No, you just remind me of, uh, somebody—a good person."

Her head downcast, she tucked at the blanket, though the bed was in perfect order. Maria's eyes moistened a little.

You've upset her. "Sorry," he said, trying to curtail his emotions.

"No, do not be sorry, Mister es-Stark." She whisked out some tissues from a box on the small chest of drawers next to the bed. "Sometimes crying is good for us. You see?" She dried her own eyes, then dabbed a single tear that had curved down to Phillip's ear. "Before, you look es-cared. Now you look better," she said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

Phillip smiled. "I'll take your word for it. Thank you, Maria." He closed his eyes and rested.

After a few minutes, a nurse hurried into the room and stopped bedside to assess her patient, who opened his eyes and lifted his head. About Phillip's age, she looked trim and athletic and hid her face behind severe black glasses. Impeccably ironed creases lined the skirt and sleeves of her starched white uniform, and one of those stiff winged hats was bobby-pinned uselessly to the top of her short auburn hair, making her look six feet tall.

GREY PINE

Ah, little miss professional, except not so little.

“Nothing wrong with your neck. I’ll be right back,” she said.

Before he could talk, she left without a second glance.

“Will that nurse answer my questions?” he asked Maria as if he’d missed his only chance.

“Yes, soon, Mister es-Stark.” Her palliative touch was back on his arm. “*Cálmate por favor.*”

“Yeah, I’ll try. Do you know when I got here, Maria?”

“Last night, late.” She moved the television to the side, revealing a round black clock on the wall.

After ten. God, think. You couldn’t see. It was the coldest chill ever; that jerk came from behind. Tried to keep him from passing—bad move. Then what? The pole—it must’ve stopped me. The truck’s probably buried.

Maria walked over to the window and opened the drapes. Hazy sunshine streaked through the glass into the small private room. She twisted a handle and the louvers separated, admitting a slight breeze that barely jostled the bunched drapes. She looked at him with a buoyant grin. “Some fresh air, Mister es-Stark,” she said.

He smiled. “Thanks. Is your bow for the hostages?”

“Yes, I pray for them, and for the family.”

The prim nurse returned, pushing a small metal cart so fast that the wheels made two loud reports when they rolled over the metal rails embedded in the doorway. “Okay, take your break,” she said, ordering Maria. The nurse gave Phillip a disparaging glance, then began checking the IV.

What’s your problem, Florence Nightingale?

“I will be back soon,” Maria said to them on the way out.

“Thanks, Maria,” he called, since she was ignored by the nurse, who was busy manipulating Phillip’s arm like he was a machine with broken parts, making the IV hurt even more. He noticed a miniature yellow ribbon on her collar and that she wore little or no makeup, an apparent attempt along with the heavy glasses to downplay her attractive symmetrical features.

Phillip looked away at the glistening sink and mirror, the closed bathroom door and a small table with a phone book but no phone.

“Maria’s a pretty good girl—at least she works,” the nurse said grudgingly as she inspected the neck brace.

“Girl? She’s a lot older than you.”

“You know what I mean.” The nurse pulled back his sheet.

Ah yes, the help. “No, I don’t know.”

After his snarling answer, she plunked a thermometer into his mouth. “Whatever,” she said, then began to roughly knead various parts of his upper torso and kept asking, “This hurt, Phillip? That?”

He shook his head to each inquiry; then she went to his arm again and jostled the IV.

“Tha hurs,” he said, and she extracted the thermometer. He felt breeze on his bare skin when she lifted one side of his hospital gown.

“Quick little procedure here, won’t hurt,” she said.

What? That’s my dick! “What the hell are you doing?”

“My job—disconnecting your catheter.”

He felt tugs and a jab and then a release of pressure.

“There, that’s all there is to it,” she said. “When you’re ready for the bathroom, we can roll the IV in there, or you can start out with a bedpan.”

Not while you’re here, lady. He lifted his head and looked at her. “Don’t you warn people before you do something like that?”

“I did warn you.”

“Not until you got there, you didn’t.”

“Maybe you should just relax, Phillip.”

Yeah, shut up and behave—relax, my ass. He turned away again as she started pumping up a blood pressure band above the elbow of his broken arm. When she finished and ripped apart the Velcro, he acted like it didn’t hurt.

The nurse moved over to his abdomen, pressed firmly, causing a sharp pain. “Tender there,” she said.

No shit. He watched as she continued the once-over. Her Dutch-

GREY PINE

boy hair-do bounced like a bobble toy and settled with each step, its perfectly square notch framing her scrubbed waxen face. The nurse's official-looking security badge had a likeness of the hospital building, her mug shot with a forced smile, and M. VAN DE GRAF, R.N. in quarter-inch bold letters.

I've seen this angel of mercy before.

"Any other pain you're experiencing, Phillip?"

Just you, Florence. He lifted his right arm. "This IV aches more than the broken arm."

"They do that sometimes; your pain med was backed up. I took care of it."

"Maybe you can take off this neck brace; don't need it."

"No, doctor must okay that." She eyed him with even more disdain. "Maybe you want to shave that stuff off your face. I suppose we'll need to find you some toiletries."

"Don't bother, I won't be here that long," he said, and she smirked like she knew better. "Do you know anything about what happened to me?"

"Doctor knows the details of your, uh, incident."

"Great. What about when I got here?"

"They said you were out when you arrived, then semi-conscious when they worked on you. You've been sleeping ever since, like you hadn't slept for days. Do you have insomnia?"

"No. How bad is my arm?"

"Broken, obviously. When he comes—"

"Yeah, yeah—*doctor* will explain it all."

"He's making a special late round just for you." After she scowled and started adjusting the drip line again, he turned to the window and stared at the floating particles in the light. She left the IV and stepped in front of him, her garish diamond ring refracting in the sun.

Lucky Mister Van de Graf.

"The IV stays until you start eating. Will you eat?"

"Of course I'll eat. What kind of a question is that?"

“Just following instructions. Your lunch has been ordered. For now, we need to fill in what’s missing on the admission forms.”

“Can I write like this?” He lifted his right arm and the attached tubes.

“Most of the forms just need your signature; I’ll fill in the rest. They opened your wallet for I.D., insurance and—”

“Fine, just show me where to sign.” *Maybe it’ll get rid of her.*

She raised the back of the bed and rolled the patient table over him from the side. He rested his right arm on the white Formica while she retrieved a brown clasp envelope from her cart and slid out the papers.

“So you still live in Ponderosa, Phillip.”

“Still?”

“High school, senior year—Marsha Wilson?”

God, pageant queen Marsha—dumped on Warren half his life. I knew I’d seen her. “Yeah, I remember now.”

“Small world.”

Too small. “Why did you wait to tell me?”

She moved a chair between Phillip and the sink and sat down with the patient chart and clipboard to record the information. “I was curious to see if it would dawn on you.”

“You’ve changed a lot.” *Changed uniforms.*

“Short hair. And you, still quite the individual.”

And you, still quite the priss.

“Why didn’t you and, um, Warren come to the tenth reunion? Almost everyone was there,” she said, her tone intimating they feared humiliation.

“I think I was doing something important like washing my clothes. Warren was probably in Japan or France on business; he’s vice-president of a computer company.” *Put that in your alumni news and smoke it.*

“Impressive,” she said, unimpressed. “Okay, they didn’t locate any relatives; who’s your next of kin?”

“My sister, Joann, in Portland.”

GREY PINE

“Phone?”

“Don’t know it. *When was she going to call?* “She’s in the book under Joann Meyers, maybe Stark—best I can do.”

“Do you want her advised of your condition?”

“No, I think I’ll survive.”

“Anyone else?”

“I need someone to call Parnell’s and have him tow my truck to the house.” *Damn, what about Ali?*

“I’ll have them arrange that.” She asked more questions to complete the form and went on to the next one. “This is a list of your clothes and the contents of your pockets. Read it to be sure it’s right.” The nurse handed over the sheet; he skimmed it in a few seconds.

“I had ulcer medicine; it’s not on here.”

“Confiscated; it’s procedure. Doctor will discuss that.”

“Of course. Why am I in a private room; is this joint trying to make a little extra cash?”

She didn’t answer. “Now medical history, Phillip.”

Mister Stark to you. He answered negatively to the first maladies on the long list; then she continued, stopping to note Phillip’s ulcer, his mother’s cancer and Stephen’s death.

“How did your father die?”

None of your business.

“Well?” She tapped her pencil and glared at him.

“Ran into a bridge.”

“Auto accident?”

“What do *you* think?”

“Whatever.” She made the notation, then finished the medical background and explained two other papers. Van de Graf quickly perused everything and asked a couple of missed questions. She put the papers in front of him and he signed them as fast as he could.

Good, now get lost.

“There’s a good boy,” she said with a facetious grin. He turned away, scrawled something on a napkin and folded it over. A sudden stab from his ulcer made him wince.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, looking suspiciously at his napkin. The nurse took away the pen and inserted the papers into the envelope.

“My medicine. What am I supposed to do about my gut?”

“You’ll have to wait for Doctor Lang. I can get some crackers to calm your stomach.” She lowered the bed.

“Don’t want any damn crackers; it’s not a stomach ulcer. I’ll eat something when I get my medicine.”

She peered over the rims of her glasses. “Now let’s not be uncooperative.”

“You can help with one lousy pill. Who’s uncooperative?”

“I’m not going to argue with you.” She nearly sang the last three words, making them sound like a warning.

“When will he get here?” Phillip asked.

“The doctor?”

“No, the Pope.”

She frowned. “You do know this is a Catholic hospital.”

“You don’t say? That must be why Mary is bigger than the TV.” He directed his eyebrows toward the Madonna on the wall.

“No need to be sacri—”

“Look, you won’t help me, and you don’t have anything else to do. Why don’t you just leave?” He turned his head toward the window; his intestines seized again.

“Phillip, I don’t appreciate your attitude.”

“I don’t appreciate yours. Make us both happy and go.”

“When Maria’s back. There has to be someone here.”

There does? He turned to her. “Why?”

“Doctor Lang will expl—”

“Bullcrap, more damn secrecy.”

“I’ll ask you to please stop the swearing, Phillip.”

“Okay, then I’ll ask you not to call me Phillip.”

“Whatever,” she said again, rolling her eyes as she began reorganizing her cart.

A hint of the chill rippled across Phillip’s forehead. *It’s coming. Now what’ll you do?*

GREY PINE

Maria came in and was immediately interrogated.

“Where have you been?” the nurse said.

Leave her alone.

“I am early, it was my break of thirty minutes.” Maria sounded obedient but not intimidated.

“Okay, okay, keep a close eye on *Mister Stark* here; he’s not cooperating.”

Screw you, lady. The chill strengthened.

“Doctor will be here any time,” Van de Graf said halfway out the door. Maria came to him and put her hand on his arm.

“Mister es-Stark. What is wrong?”

“Hi, Maria. Nothing—we were fighting a little. I’m glad you’re back.”

“You look es-cared again.”

“No, I’m not scared. There’s something trying to come back into my head. I just have to keep it away.” She soothed his forehead with the back of her hand again. *Yes—thank you.* He started to close his eyes, and she lifted her hand.

“You want to rest, Mister es-Stark?”

Not Mister. He looked at her. “No, please stay here.”

“It is a bad dream you have?” Maria held his shoulder.

“Sort of like a dream, except I’m awake; it’s real.” *It’s already starting to fade.* “But you’re helping me.”

“What do you mean?” She parted his long hair again.

“You’re helping me by just being here.”

“I am happy you think I help you, Mister es-Stark.” She put both her hands around his lower arm, above the IV, comforting him with a pat.

You’re overmatched, chillbrains. He stared at the window a minute or so before speaking. “Maria, have they told you why you’re here?”

“No. They just say to watch you, call the nurse when you wake up.” She closed her eyes a few moments and when she opened them, crossed herself. “I just pray for you now, Mister es-Stark. You are going to be better, I know this.”

A prayer'll do it. Shut up, the chill's gone, isn't it? “Uh, that’s very nice of you. Will you do me a favor, Maria?”

“If I can, Mister es-Stark.”

He handed her the napkin. “That’s my neighbor in Ponderosa; could you call and ask him to leave cat food by my back door? Oh, and please tell him the garage is open.”

She nodded willingly then hid the note in her pocket as if she had broken some rule. Phillip realized Maria was reacting to the arrival of Van de Graf and the two lab-coated doctors who shuffled in slowly behind her.

20

The physicians chatted by the door then moved to the foot of the bed. Maria backed away while Van de Graf stood at attention by Phillip like she was the one to be inspected. One doctor, much younger than the other, smiled in Phillip's general direction as he reached for the clipboard. He was clean-shaven, towheaded, well over six feet tall, his plain face showing no wrinkles or stress.

"Doing okay, Phillip?" he asked, seemingly in charge, as if he had decades of experience. Unaware that his patient nodded to the obligatory question, he skimmed the data. "I'm Doctor Lang; this is Doctor Mortinson," he said, attentive to the chart.

I'm over here, doc. "Hi," Phillip said.

Lang attached some papers to the clipboard as the nurse moved the table out of the way and raised the bed again. Phillip eyed the older doctor, who wasn't much taller than Maria. Instead of a shirt and tie like his counterpart, Mortinson wore a tweedy green sweater under the lab coat, though the day was warm. Skin drooped below his eyes down to a bushy white moustache, and Mortinson's straight silver hair touched the back of his collar. He squinted as if his silver-rimmed glasses were the wrong ones.

What's Einstein doing here?

Doctor Lang took a couple of long strides up to Phillip and finally looked right at him. “Does sitting up bother you?” he asked. The other doctor was scribbling notes.

“No, but my ulcer’s been checking in.”

“Yes, we’ll discuss that in a moment,” Lang said. He briefly examined Phillip’s abdomen and torso then spoke again when he began to gingerly knead the trapezius muscles on both sides of the brace. “No pain here, then. Good, I think we can get rid of it.” Doctor Lang turned to Van de Graf.

Phillip sent an *I-told-you-so* scowl toward the nurse as she took two rigid steps forward to remove the plastic device. She finished quickly and held the brace behind her back.

“I understand you’re a teacher in Ponderosa,” Lang said, giving the broken arm and cast an inspection.

Ah, bedside manner. “Yes.” Phillip looked over at Maria, and again she reminded him of his mother, smiling proudly over some ordinary accomplishment.

The physician dispatched a cursory examination of Phillip’s heart and lungs then began to remove the dressing from his head injury. “What do you teach, Phillip?”

“Junior high—science; P.E.”

“Must be challenging.” Lang removed the gauze from Phillip’s head. After a few slow steps forward, the second doctor took a glimpse at the gash. Phillip saw a tiny yellow ribbon like the nurse’s pinned to each doctor’s lapel.

A company gesture, except for Maria’s big bow.

“Before shift change we’ll need a new dressing on the wound, Mrs. Van de Graf,” Lang told her as he replaced the bandage.

“Yes, doctor,” she said, standing now in front of Maria. Lang asked Phillip to hang his feet over the side.

Geez, see if you can keep your ass out of the air. He bunched the gown behind, swiveled to the side knee-to-knee and dangled his feet below. Lang shined a pocket flashlight into his pupils then wheeled the

IV pole to the side and conducted a hasty neurological exam. When Phillip started to get back under the covers, the physician held him by the shoulder and gently pinched the skin under his upper arm, then did the same to his stomach and upper leg. After that, the doctors left him sitting there and took a few furtive steps away, mumbling to each other.

What the hell? “Can I get back in?” he asked, indignant.

“Yes, please go ahead,” Lang said, then spoke to his colleague before coming back to the bed to begin a rapid-fire diagnosis.

“Phillip, it seems there’s no serious damage from the blow to your head; no concussion. It bled considerably, but five stitches shouldn’t leave much of a scar; the swelling will last a few days. The contusions on your abdomen are from the seat belt, which saved your life, I believe; and you were also fortunate to avoid whiplash and deeper lesions. Your abdomen will be sore for a week or so.

“The arm has a relatively clean break in the lower radius, about here.” His finger darted over to the cast, just above the wrist. “You’ll be in the cast for several weeks; the arm will eventually be good as new. I’ll show you the X-ray next time, and by then we’ll have you up for a more thorough neurological exam. Do you have questions so far?”

“So far?” *There’s more?* “I’ll wait until you finish.”

“All right. Doctor Mortinson and I have some items to discuss of a private nature.” He picked up the chart and then approached Maria to read her nametag. “Maria, is it? You may leave now; please wait in the hall,” Lang told her in a direct but cordial manner, and she left right away.

Just a damn minute. “I need to speak to *you* privately,” Phillip said, twisting his forehead toward Van de Graf, indicating she had to leave. Though the doctor hadn’t expected this interruption, he turned to the nurse.

“Mrs. Van de Graf, for just a moment please.” She arched her brow and walked out, stiff as a soldier.

“Thanks,” Phillip said. “If you’re going to discuss something private, I object to *that* woman being here.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way; Mrs. Van de Graf is one of our most

efficient nurses.” He seemed more disappointed than surprised by Phillip’s comment. “You do understand it is part of her job to confer with us on what we’re about to discuss?”

“Fine, just not here, but you can bring Maria back.”

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t be professional.”

Professional—give me a break.

“She’ll be back soon,” Lang said, and came around to the side of the bed, the old doctor behind him now, writing again.

“All right, so what’s the big secret?” Phillip asked.

“How long have you had the prescription from Doctor May?”

“He’s written it for years; since his partner died.”

Lang didn’t hide a disgusted sigh. “Okay, we’ll come back to the ulcer later. Phillip, you arrived here with your weight and body fat below normal. How did that come about?”

Crap. “I don’t know; maybe I need to reconsider my diet a little. My father used to do some of the cooking.”

“Yes, we were sorry to hear of your loss. Do you mind telling us the circumstances of his death?”

What is this? “He was a drunk. He ran into a bridge, like I told the nurse.”

“You didn’t tell Mrs. Van de Graf he was an alcoholic.” He glanced at Mortinson.

And watch her gloat? “None of her business.”

“Why did you tell her you wouldn’t eat?”

“I didn’t. I said I’d eat when I got my medicine.”

“Is the ulcer bothering you now?”

“Since she left, it settled a little. You know how it works, sometimes they flare up when you’re aggravated; she aggravates the hell out of me.”

“All right, I get it,” Lang said, tiring of Phillip’s opinion of the nurse. “What do you remember about the crash?”

“Not much. The ash was blowing everywhere; I was trying to get home.” The doctors consulted their documents, so Phillip stopped.

GREY PINE

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, please go on.”

“Okay, so this jerk passes me, I couldn’t see, and my truck was off the road. I don’t remember exactly what happened next, but I was off that road before, after the ash fall, when I almost rolled it. I’m sure it was in the back of my mind that you can’t brake hard or crank the wheel on those steep crowns.” Phillip paused because Mortinson eyed him suspiciously.

What’s his problem? “And I remember a pole; it must have stopped me. Should’ve braked a little more, I guess.”

Mortinson stepped forward, squinting again. “So, you decided that hitting the pole was better than rolling over, Mister Stark?” he asked, hardly disguising his doubt.

Einstein speaks. “It happened fast; I think so. Why do I have two doctors?”

“I’m sorry,” Lang said, “Doctor Mortinson is a psychiatrist; I should’ve mentioned that sooner.”

“Why’s he here?”

“After you finish your version of the collision, he has some questions for you.”

My version? “I am finished.”

The doctors changed places, Lang acting more deferential than before. “Please tell us how you’re feeling emotionally, Mister Stark, after such an experience.” Mortinson said, his eyelids sagging as if he was bored.

Already starting his thing—don’t need this. Phillip ignored him, looking up at the ceiling until Lang intervened.

“Phillip, we both have other patients; we’d appreciate your cooperation.”

Tell them; then Maria can come back. “All right,” he said, grumbling. “How do I feel? Confused and pissed.”

“At what or whom are you angry?” the psychiatrist asked.

Doesn’t matter. “I don’t know.” Phillip turned away and saw Mortinson reflected in the blank TV screen above.

“Mister Stark, what do your supervisors say about your work, if I may ask?”

“My work? All my supervisor cares about is if I make trouble for him, and what you *really* want to know is how I get along, right?” Tubes and all, Phillip lifted his cup and shook a few ice chips onto his tongue.

“Yes, something like that.” Mortinson rubbed his chin.

Einstein thinks he’s Freud. “Okay, I’ll cut the crap for you. I like teaching, but not the stupid system. That’s about it.” *Calm, Phillip, like she says.* He turned away and imagined Maria’s pleasant face in the spot where it belonged, but the psychiatrist took another step forward into that space. He was so short and the bed so high that he and Phillip were almost face to face.

“Mister Stark,” Mortinson resumed, “do you feel like you don’t belong in education?”

“I don’t know. Maybe education doesn’t belong with me.”

“I see. We’ll follow up on that later.” As if he were onto some grand insight, he raised his grey eyebrows to Lang.

Freud knows all. “Is that it?”

“Last night there was a witness, a hiker; his description isn’t consistent with what you just told us.” The psychiatrist nodded with self-assurance toward the papers held by the other doctor, who had taken another step back.

“I remember him. So what, why would I lie about it?” A hint of the chill crossed his back, between the shoulders.

“No one thinks you’re lying,” Mortinson said with a brief condescending smile. “You’re telling us what you remember, but your condition has likely affected your memory. For example, he said visibility was good.”

“Bull, that’s one thing I’m sure of; I couldn’t see.”

“More importantly, Mister Stark, the witness and the officer suggested your crash could have been intentional,” he said, his tone still placid.

Intentional? Jesus. “You think I tried to kill myself?” He felt the chill try to rally in his spine. *Easy.*

GREY PINE

“We haven’t made any firm conclusions.”

Liar. “That’s why somebody’s here all the time?”

“Just a precaution. Tell me about that scar on your wrist, Mister Stark.”

“What? That’s the wrong side of my wrist, doctor. For God’s sake, it’s from an accident with a broken dish. You can just forget it, I didn’t try to kill myself.”

“Very well. Have you had any problems with alcohol?”

“I wasn’t drunk.”

“We know that, but we want to know—”

“Listen, damn it, I probably drink less than you do.” The chill hesitated in his back, as if it were deciding what to do. *Shit, don’t get messed up in front of them.*

“Mister Stark, please try to relax,” Mortinson said.

The magic word again, thanks for the professional help.

Doctor Lang stepped forward. “How often were you taking the ulcer drug, Phillip?”

“I lost track. Every time my gut hurt, three times a day, maybe more.”

“Mister Stark,” Mortinson said, reclaiming their side of the conversation, “have you had difficulty sleeping?”

Ha, you’re dead wrong. “No, I sleep a lot.”

“More than you’re accustomed to?”

He trapped you—just tell him. “I guess, but I’m always up late in summer. When I wake up in the morning, I have this coldness in my head.” *It’s waiting there, right now.* He stopped, expecting the psychiatrist would ask him to describe the sensation.

“And the sleeping?”

Guess the chill isn’t important. “I go to sleep to get rid of the coldness. When I wake up, it comes a second time, then I go back to sleep again. I’m up by one.” *Or two.*

“Any of that later in the day?” Mortinson asked, jotting in his notebook.

“No. Well, not usually. A couple times when, uh—”

“When you were stressed or angry?” Lang asked with some eagerness, and his cohort turned to him with a sneer.

Uh oh, Einstein, he’s on your turf. “I don’t know, you two argue about it.” His nape trembled a little. “Finished now?” To keep the chill at bay, he closed his eyes.

“Perhaps we’ll take a short break, Phillip.” Lang sounded sheepish after committing his transgression.

“Yes, excuse us,” Mortinson said.

Phillip opened his eyes and saw them walking at Mortinson’s slow pace until they were gone. He started to rest but heard Maria come in and watched her return to the bed. *Thank God.* “Hi, Maria, please take a chair; I bet you didn’t sit down all morning.”

“Thank you, Mister es-Stark.” She comforted his shoulder. “I cannot look lazy to the nurse.”

You’re twice the nurse she is. “Maria, even she knows how hard you work. Please sit.”

Maria smiled then lowered the bed and scooted in a chair. She sat and moved her hands to his arm. Phillip closed his eyes again.

The royal treatment; you don’t deserve it. After a couple minutes, he knew the threat of the chill was gone and he looked at her.

“Mister es-Stark, it is good you rest. I bother you?”

“There’s no way you bother me, Maria. Did I get you in trouble with Van de Graf?”

“She is angry with you. You do not like her, why?”

“I knew her in school, we never got along.”

“I see,” she said, and then paused. “It is wonderful you are a teacher.” Her dark eyes glistened. “Your mother and father, I think they must be very proud.”

Of what? That’s how she sees it, Phillip. “They both died, but I do have a sister who wants to teach.”

“She knows you are in the hospital? I am sorry; I must, uh, be minding of my business.”

GREY PINE

“No need to apologize, I’ll give her a call.” *When I’m out of here.* “What about your family? Do you have kids?”

“Oh yes, three boys. My Ernesto, he—” Before she could go on, the two doctors returned, moving the rolling table over to the bed. Maria got up and exchanged smiles with Phillip on her way out.

“You look more at ease.” Doctor Lang put a small packet on the table.

“Yeah, Maria’s your best medicine.”

“Well, yes,” Lang answered, glancing awkwardly at Mortinson.

“Phillip, we need to change your ulcer drug, the one you’ve been taking is contraindicated. Taken excessively, it can have serious side effects. I’d like you to start on this.” He opened the sample into a miniature paper cup and then poured water over Phillip’s ice. Both men stared at him.

They want to see if you’ll behave. He picked up the pill cup and swallowed the medicine without water.

“Okay,” Lang said, raising his eyebrows. “Phillip, your old drug is known to exacerbate depression, which you’ve been living with for some time, it seems.”

“Depression? That’s your big conclusion?”

Lang pulled the table aside and the psychiatrist spoke up with an air of serene authority. “That’s what your symptoms indicate, Mister Stark. After losing a loved one, depression is, of course, normal for a while, but—”

Big deal. “That’s good, isn’t it?” Phillip said to Lang, intentionally ignoring the psychiatrist. “Except for my arm, a little bump and a few pounds, there’s nothing really wrong with me.”

The young physician turned to Mortinson, who resumed his slow spiel. “Mister Stark, what you seem to exhibit is beyond the normal grieving process. With prolonged clinical depression, the patient often denies he is profoundly ill, or is unaware, either of which can lead to tragic results.”

Back to suicide. “Listen, I don’t know exactly what happened and

neither do you, but I didn't attempt suicide," he said, and Mortinson raised his eyebrows toward his colleague.

"We hope that's true," Lang said, "but we'd like you to stay a couple more days, start your prescriptions, eat regularly and regain some strength. We want to be confident about your frame of mind when you leave here. Doctor?" He bowed his head slightly to the psychiatrist.

"You've told us, Mister Stark, that the symptoms come with your anger, and I—"

"You don't get it," Phillip broke in. "I know my anger has become a problem, but I'm not angry when I wake up, and that's when I usually have *symptoms*. Explain that, doctor."

"Well, I was about to tell you I'd like to have a short session with you right now, if you feel well enough."

"I feel fine. What kind of session?"

"I suspect you're going to need long-term psychoanalysis. For now, we'll just have a preliminary discussion."

Farm house, analysis, I knew it. "Would it save time if I told you I hated my father?" Phillip said with a laugh.

"Mister Stark, it's a complex process to get to the underlying causes of serious depression."

Screw this. "I thought the drug was the big problem." He ignored Mortinson again and looked at the other doctor.

"It likely made things much worse," Lang said. "Your new ulcer medicine won't affect mood, and we also want to start you on an anti-depressant, which is most effective when used in tandem with therapy. It's important you understand that." He directed a patronizing smile to his colleague.

Want outta here? Do what they want—for now. "Can I assume you know there's no interactions with the new drugs?"

"Fair question—no known contraindications."

"All right, get on with it."

"Good, Phillip," Lang said, starting to touch Phillip's arm, but he

GREY PINE

thought better of it. “Since you’re about to eat, we can stop the IV and drop the twenty-four-hour watch.”

Hold on. “You’re going take Maria and leave me with that nurse? I should’ve said I was going to jump out the window.”

“Come now,” Mortinson said, “Maria helps you that much?”

“Yeah, maybe she can give you some pointers,” Phillip answered with a wry chuckle, but Mortinson ignored him and looked at his notes.

Stifling a grin, Lang cleared his throat. “Phillip, she can finish the day here. I trust you’ll be okay tonight?”

“I’ll manage. Thanks, doc.”

“You’re welcome. You’ll also have a new nurse with the next shift, but Mrs. Van de Graf will likely be with you again in the morning. Please give her a chance. I’ll leave you with Doctor Mortinson for now and see you bright and early tomorrow. Take care.” Doctor Lang headed for the door.

“Don’t wake me if Nurse Ratched is here,” Phillip called to him. “I’ll be trying to sleep through her shift.” Lang pursed his lips with mild disapproval, then Phillip saw him meet Maria in the hall. They spoke a moment; she stepped forward to smile at Phillip and then closed the door.

Great, now it’s me and Einstein.

21

Doctor Mortinson moved a chair a few feet away from Phillip, turned it toward the window and sat down.

What's he doing? “Why did you turn your chair around?”

“Allow me to explain. I—”

“Hang on a sec, is Maria still right outside?”

“Yes, to prevent intrusions,” he said, facing the dull sunshine. “Now, I prefer to work like this, Mister Stark, so body language doesn't interfere with our communication.”

“Whatever you say. Over.”

“Pardon me?”

“So you'd know I was finished. Over.”

“I see. If it's very uncomfortable not facing me, I—”

“Just joking, let's get it *over* with.”

“Yes, humorous.” He coughed before beginning again. “Mister Stark, do you mind if I address you as Phillip?”

“Knock yourself out.” He turned from Mortinson to the white ceiling overhead.

“Okay, Phillip, please fill me in a little on the history of your relationships, a couple of the best and worst.”

This is such crap. He gave Mortinson very sketchy descriptions of

relationships with his mother, Warren, and Lupe. “Last but not least,” he said, “my father.” *The part he’s eagerly awaiting.* “Actually, we’re talking about two people, my father and Stephen.” After a terse summary of his conflicts with Stephen, Phillip finished with, “You’re going to love this: he haunts me in my dreams. Interesting, huh?”

“Well, yes, I’d like to go a little deeper with him.”

What a surprise. “Weren’t we going to keep this short?”

“Another ten minutes or so, Phillip. Maybe you could tell me whatever comes to mind about him from your childhood, and then move forward. Try not to self-criticize or edit what you’re about to say. Let your thinking flow, and verbalize whatever comes to you—just your early memories about him and wherever they take you.”

He must think I’m an idiot. “Free association.”

“Well, yes.”

“I did have to take psychology to become a teacher.”

“Of course, all the better. So just let it go, don’t stop yourself. If you like, I’ll put your bed all the way back and you can close your eyes.”

“I don’t think so.” He stared at the blank TV.

“If you’re comfortable, please begin.”

This is stupid—so tell him, he wants to hear it all. “This is stupid.” *Good boy—what the hell.* “Okay, let’s play your little game. My father, my real father, he was, I guess, pretty ordinary, quiet, pattering with things all the time. I’m not sure what made him so content, being with my mother I guess. They were pretty close, only argued a little when he was plastered, which was maybe once a week back then. He wasn’t violent, just a jerk, not himself, and I’d stay away from him.

“Anyway, we did some things together, especially woodworking. He bought me a kid’s carpentry set and had me using real tools in no time; we made things other kids envied, like a big fort we put up.” *So I miss him, big deal.* He felt pressure in the corners of his eyes. *Don’t cry, twerp, just say it.* “I miss him, that’s all, even though near the end I could hardly ever reach him.”

What a load of crap.

Shut up. “Bastard,” he mumbled.

“Excuse me, Phillip?”

Damn. “Not you.”

“Then who?”

“Talking to myself, it’s nothing.”

Mortinson waited, and then asked, “Do you hear voices?”

“No, I just remember things people said. Don’t you?” Phillip looked at him, noticing that his white hair almost touched his back.

“Who do you remember?”

“A few people, mostly Stephen; things he repeated.”

“And you speak back to him?”

“Usually not out loud. So what? I know it’s not him.”

“If you’re not too tired, please go on.”

Now he thinks I’m schizo. “There’s nothing else to say.”

“M-hm.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” There was a slight tremble in his lower back. *No, don’t let it come, look at something.* He tried to concentrate on the tiny holes in the ceiling tiles. *What’s Einstein doing? Waiting me out.*

“What are you thinking, Phillip?” Mortinson finally asked.

“That you’re waiting me out. This is a waste of time.” He could feel the chill move up his back. *Damn, it’s coming all right. Easy, you can hold it off.* He searched for a pattern in the soundproofing holes overhead.

“Phillip, from your description of the relationship and your recurring dreams, I’m sure you’d agree that you seem to harbor a remarkable amount of hostility toward your father.”

That’s it? He looked back down. “That’s my feedback?”

“Did you expect something else?”

“News flash: I don’t agree with your learned conclusion.”

“Please explain.”

“Okay, I told you about my *hostility* for Stephen, and then I told you about Dad. Did I sound hostile toward him?”

“It seems you’re exhibiting what we call resistance. As you

approach memories that could reveal the root of some of your problems, you resist talking about them, perhaps skipping painful details. You seem to deny the difficulties you must have had with him when you were younger.”

“Hate to burst your bubble, but I wasn’t a miserable kid.” *It’s colder; forget this. No, nail him.* He turned to Mortinson. “Okay, you want free association? When I told you about Stephen your face must have lit up, but I don’t know, since I can’t see it. You thought you were peeking into my uh, subconscious. Let’s see if I remember this BS. Uh, repressed deep-seated aggression toward my father—right?” He shivered between his shoulder blades.

“But you don’t get it,” Phillip continued, “I’ll tell you again. Before he started drinking a lot, I loved him. Then I still loved him when he wasn’t drunk with his buddy Mick, the world’s two biggest assholes. How could I repress aggression toward Stephen when I hated his guts and knew it all along? Nothing hidden, nothing harbored—I hated him for what he did to my father. So how am I doing with my *flow*?” Phillip waited; no answer. “I just called bullshit on you, don’t you have anything to say?” The chill had nearly settled at the back of his head.

“Well, you seem to be transferring your anger toward me.”

“From Stephen to you? It doesn’t have anything to do with you, doctor. What I care about is what’s wrong now.” *So cold—now what’ll you do?*

“Go on.”

“With what, painful subjects from my childhood? I have something painful in my head right this moment, but that doesn’t seem to matter to you.”

“I’m not quite sure what you mean, but I believe I’m pretty aware of your condition.”

“That’s a contradiction if I ever heard one.” *To hell with it.* In order to concentrate on the ceiling, Phillip moved his left hand to his temple to block the fluorescent glare, but he grazed himself on the forehead with his cast. “Shit,” he said and put his arm down.

Only those little holes up there. Wait, just connect them. Over, down, back, up—first square. Now back and down, over and up—the second one. Good, over and down, back again, and up . . . His head moved with his eyes in the making of squares until he heard Mortinson talking nearby.

“ . . . not aware you could be this incapacitated.”

. . . over and up—don't bother me, it's working. Let's see, that's square ten—a whole section. Start again—connect the dots, boys and girls. Down and back . . .

After a few minutes, Phillip heard the doctor speaking again.

“ . . . and I have a recommendation . . . ”

. . . and over, leave me alone—then down and back . . .

“ . . . we should consider ECT.”

. . . that's better. Over and up—what's he want? “What are you talking about?” Though the edge was off the chill, Phillip held his place up in the tiles.

“Electroconvulsive therapy, ECT, along with analysis.”

ECT my ass, Doctor Frankenstein. “Listen,” he said, his eyes still directed above. “Nobody's going to put any goddamn electrodes on *my* head.” The chill kicked right in.

Cálmate.

She's right. Start again—back, down, and over . . .

“Phillip?”

Screw you. “Leave me alone.” *And then up, close the square and back—calm—down and over again . . .* Phillip continued until he was drowsy, but he saw Mortinson by the bed, watching him.

“Are you all right, Phillip?”

It's still close. “I'm okay,” he said, his eyes heavy.

“You should know ECT is the most immediate way to ease symptoms of severe depression, and it's relatively harmless.”

BS. Now more alert, he looked right at the doctor. “I read somewhere it destroys brain cells and memory.”

“It's rare for memory loss to be severe, and a regimen of ECT in conjunction with long-term analysis—”

GREY PINE

“It’s rare? That’s reassuring? What’s more depressing than losing any memory?” *Calm, Phillip.* “Please go.”

“Very well, I’ll leave for now.”

Thanks for nothing. He slept nearly an hour, waking when he heard Doctor Lang come in to ask Maria to wait outside. Smiling at Phillip, she let go of his arm and left.

Didn’t even know she was here. “Why are you back, doc?”

“Well, Doctor Mortinson called and said you weren’t very receptive to his recommendations.”

“Now wait a minute, he wanted to—”

“Phillip, I don’t want you to get upset; please hear me out.” The doctor was friendly but serious. “Do you feel well enough to talk for a minute?”

Phillip checked the ceiling tiles to reassure himself that his refuge had not somehow vanished. “I’m fine; go on.”

“There are other options for therapy besides analysis.”

“Yeah, tell that to your buddy Einstein.”

“I’m going to be honest, Phillip; I’m looking for some cooperation here so I can let you go in a couple days.” His voice was now stern. “We have to agree on a treatment plan and you need to show me you’re going to follow it.”

He thinks I’m a basket case. “Go ahead.”

“As I told you, anti-depressants aren’t enough; it’s crucial you begin therapy, perhaps with a younger therapist. Will you agree to that?”

“Do you have one who isn’t obsessed with potty training?”

“All right, Phillip, I get it. I have a list of reputable therapists who are not analysts, but you have to agree to stick with it. I want you to take it easy here for a couple more days; a day or two at home, and then begin therapy. If it doesn’t seem to work out, then you try someone else, that’s the deal.”

Or what? He sniggered. “Okay, I see you’re serious.”

“You have a serious illness, Phillip; I expect *you* to be serious about

it. I'll make an appointment for about four or five days from now. Are mornings okay?"

Fat chance. "No, I can't do it in the mornings."

"You have a commitment?"

With the damn chillbrains. "Yes."

"Afternoon then?" He turned to the door, ready to leave.

"Late afternoon is good."

"Okay then, if there's nothing else, we'll talk about this again tomorrow." The doctor smiled and walked out; Maria returned right away and moved the table back over the bed.

"Hi, Maria, I won't sleep through your watch this time."

"Rest is very important, Mister es-Stark. They say you will get better soon?"

"Sure, could be a lot worse."

"Good. Oh, Mister Beck is happy to care for the cat."

"Thanks, Maria. Can I ask you another favor?"

Claro que sí. She comforted his arm again.

"Would you call me Phillip?"

"It would not be right near the others I think. When nobody is here, maybe I call you *Felipe*, the name of my *tío*."

"Felipe, sure, Felipe."

The shiny cart clattered through the doorway, a frowning Mrs. Van de Graf guiding it from behind. Ignoring Maria and Phillip, she put a pill cup on his table.

She's not too pissed; tell it to the shrink, lady. He watched her fool with the IV and rip off some adhesive along with his arm hair, but he anticipated the pain and tried hard not show it. *No satisfaction for you, Florence.*

Van de Graf spoke to him through clenched teeth. "Take that pill. Your private helper can find a straw. Lunch is here, and you'll eat or I won't disconnect the IV." She turned to leave.

"Would you be so kind to tell me what the pill is?"

"I've had enough of your sarcasm. Doctor just told you what it is."

She turned to leave and looked at Maria. “*Your* job is to tell me if he doesn’t take it.”

“Bye, Florence,” he said, but she just walked out.

A puzzled look on her face, Maria got a flex-straw from the small chest of drawers and put it in his cup. “Ready for the pill, Mister es-Stark?”

“Not *Mister Stark*, okay, Maria?”

“Oh, yes. *Si, Felipe*.” She smiled, moved the cup closer, and he took the drug.

“Your boss is not too happy with me.”

“Yes, she is angry, but she knows this work. I think she will learn how to be with people.”

When pigs fly. He sipped more water. “I’ll try to get along with her.” *And keep her off Maria’s case*.

“*Está bien, Felipe*.” She comforted his arm again, then Van de Graf came back in with a food tray. She put it on his table and glared at him. The tray held a carton of milk, a navel orange, raisins, and a slab of some kind of chopped meat with two buttermilk biscuits lathered in thin yellow gravy.

Aak—try not to be a total jerk about this. “I’ll take the milk and fruit, but I can’t eat this,” Phillip told the nurse in the most cooperative tone he could muster.

She started dismantling the IV. “Well, let me guess, Mister Stark.” She yanked off a Band-Aid; he pretended again it didn’t hurt. “You don’t like biscuits and gravy.”

“I don’t eat meat anymore.” He kept an eye on her and readied himself for each little burst of pain as she removed the rest of the adhesive and the needle.

“So, you’re a vegetarian,” Van de Graf finally said, securing cotton over his vein with tape.

“No, I just don’t like meat.”

“I believe that makes you a vegetarian. It’s obviously done wonders for your health,” she added, putting the materials on her cart. “What about eggs and dairy?”

“I just told you I’d drink the milk.” *Easy*.

The nurse picked up the food tray and smacked the milk carton and the little red box of raisins onto his table; then she dropped the orange so carelessly it rolled onto the bed. “You’ll have to wait until five for a vegetarian meal.” She disappeared around the doorway with her cart, and Phillip looked up at Maria.

“Well, I tried,” he said with a grin.

“Yes. She hurt you, Mister es-Stark?”

“No, I’m fine, Maria.”

“Tomorrow, maybe she forgets. Please try your milk.” Maria pried open the carton, inserted the straw, and put it in front of him. He sucked in some long gulps. “On my next break, *Felipe*, I can find juice and cookies,” she said.

“Thanks, I’ll be okay, but I’ll need help with this orange in a minute.” He palmed the fruit in his right hand, enjoying the sense of having some physical control again.

“Please tell me why you do not eat the meat,” she said, frowning her brow slightly.

“No big deal. It just doesn’t feel right to me anymore.”

She waited and looked at him, encouraging an explanation.

Okay, make it quick. “Maria, you’ve probably heard about cultures where they eat dogs?” He sipped more milk.

“Yes, I think it is horrible.”

“Well, I feel the same about dogs as pigs or cattle.”

“I see. What if a big animal, if it tries to hurt you?”

“I’d kill it if I had to, but humans are more dangerous.” *Enough of your deal, Phillip.* He sucked on the straw until air bubbled in the carton.

“Some of what you say is like the old ways in Mexico.”

“What do you mean?”

“We are *indígenas*—Indians. My grandmother and my grandfather always believe the old ways, not very good Catholics. *Mi abuelita* talk the old language today, not much es-Spanish. When they kill for food,

she believe the es-spirit is everywhere, in the animal, and the plants. Some people they laugh at her and *mi abuelito*." At the mention of her deceased grandfather, she crossed herself. "But for them it is religion; I have *respeto*, um, respect for this."

"I'm sure you do, but you're a good Catholic, right?"

"*Pues, sí*. Sometimes we say a true *Mexicano* is also *Guadalupano*. I can fix the orange for you?"

"Yes, please, but will you explain what you just said?"

"*Sí, Felipe*." She picked up the fruit. "*Juan Diego*, he was Chichimeca, he see *La Virgen de Guadalupe* long time ago, and then many people change to be Catholics." As she spoke, long strips of peel spiraled down into the garbage can. "One day, we hope *el Papa* will make *Juan Diego* a saint." She let one hand go from the orange and crossed herself again. "Last year, I see *el Papa—en México*; he bless *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and *Juan Diego*."

The Pope—thank God she didn't hear me before. "You went to Mexico for his visit?"

"Oh yes, my family from here and *México*. It is a great honor for us." Maria paused to consider what she said, picking off the last bits of peel. "I am *Guadalupana*; it is even part of my name."

"It is? Would you tell me your whole name?"

Her smile broadened. "*María Guadalupe Martínez Prieto*. I am *María* only here. To my family, I am *Lupita*."

Good God. "You're called Lupe?"

"Sometimes. This is a surprise to you?" She placed the sectioned orange on a napkin in front of him.

"My girlfriend—" *You wish, Phillip*. "Her name's Lupe."

"Yes? She is *Mexicana*?"

"Half, from her mom."

"*Guadalupe* is um, common, but to have the name is also an honor." Maria washed her hands at the sink and smiled at her thoughts. "My husband, he is a quiet man; but he is angry with Mexican movies of *La India María*, because she is *payasa*, a clown with my name." She finished the sentence with a self-effacing titter and dried her hands on a

paper towel. Maria looked up at Phillip, who was swallowing a section of orange. "You look sad when you talk about her, *Felipe*," she said.

"About Lupe?" *It's that obvious?* "We're having a few problems."

"I hope she knows you are a good man. Have more orange."

"I will. You see the good side of everyone, Maria; I tend to assume the worst until people prove differently. But you're a good teacher, you've shown me I can at least be more neutral." She was listening carefully, but didn't comment. *Maybe she didn't understand.* "Is neutral a new word?"

"No, it is almost the same in es-Spanish, but you learn this not because of me." She placed one hand on her chest, just below her neck. "It is because you are good."

"Thanks," he said, trying not to scoff. "Maria, do you know they're letting you stay here all day?" So as not to discomfit her, he didn't show how much that pleased him.

She nodded and smiled. "Yes, they tell me."

"Where's your regular job?"

"I clean on this floor and two others."

The right people doing the wrong work. "When you go back, I'm going to miss talking to you."

"I can visit on my break?"

"Of course, if you promise to sit and rest."

She grinned at his reminder. While Maria reached for a chair, he looked at the holes in the ceiling. *Phillip's little squares; at least you've got some backup.*

Maria slid the chair up next to him and sat. "You will get better and maybe come visit my family. I make you *tamales* with beans, no meat," she said, the corners of her eyes narrowing with the quip.

"Sounds great." He patted her once on the arm. "Maria?"

"*Sí, Felipe.*"

"If it's not too personal, may I call you *Lupita* when nobody's here?"

"*Claro que sí, mijo,*" she said, her nurturing touch around his wrist again.

22

Waiting for his cab at the emergency entrance, Phillip felt foolish in the wheelchair, a male orderly standing at his side. Maria had removed some of the grit from his hat, and he was glad he had it to hide the dressing on his head. She traded addresses with him before he checked out, and she promised to pray for his health. He reminded Maria to sit down more often, and they hugged each other like parting relatives.

Phillip's disturbing dreams decreased during the three days in the hospital, but the chill was still there, strongest in the early mornings when he had to make his squares in the ceiling to escape back into slumber. Maria visited on every break, and he nearly forgot about the chill in the afternoons, except when it surfaced once after an acrimonious exchange with Van de Graf. He ignored her as much as he could and got along okay with the other nurses.

Now he scanned the well-kept hospital grounds and saw no ash, but the sky was flint grey. *Traffic's blowing around what's left.* Though the sunlight was filtered, the afternoon was very warm; he pulled down his brim and stared at his battered tennis shoes. He felt perspiration begin to accumulate on the inside facing of his cap.

"Could we please wait in the shade?" he asked, not looking up.

"Of course, sir, thought you might want some light after being cooped up," the orderly said as a florist's van parked in the lane.

"Thanks anyway," he answered, and the man pulled him under the wide awning at the entrance. A taxi pulled up in front, not fifteen feet away. It was an old four-door Bel-Aire with a fresh white paint job, a phone number stenciled in black on the side. Phillip could tell that the cratered bodywork was finished in somebody's back yard with Bondo and a ball-peen hammer. He was surprised to hear the Chevy's motor run smoothly.

"Mornin'," the cabby called to them as he circled around the front of the taxi, a lit cigarette between a thumb and forefinger. His slightly stooped frame betrayed his actual height of almost six feet, and he was so thin that his belt was pulled into its last hole and threaded back into the front loop of his tan work pants. A yellow ribbon curled from the collar of a white polo shirt tucked deep into the trousers.

The cabby combed his free hand once through his straight, slick grey hair, incursions of baldness showing only on his temples. He rattled out a deep cough as he came to Phillip, who was repulsed by the old man's cigarette stench, bloodshot eyes, and the liver spots on his face.

"Where to, bud?"

He's gawking like I'm the one who's kicking off. "To Ponderosa," he finally answered.

"Okay. Can you walk over—?"

Phillip was already up from the chair, stepping off the curb and reaching for the cab's rear handle. He got in, closed the door with his right hand, then reached across the cast and put his plastic bag of meager belongings on the floor. Holding the seatbelt clamp with his elbow, he shoved in the metal slot from the other strap. Phillip coughed from the stale, pungent smoke odor then rolled the two half-open windows all the way down. He tilted back his sweaty hat and watched the man come to the front door, take a last drag, and then hack a couple more times.

The driver extended his lanky arm through the window and dropped the cigarette into a soda can that was secured in a black plastic

GREY PINE

holder on the driveline hump. The can apparently contained liquid since the butt gave off only one wisp of dying smoke. The cabby opened the door and sat down.

“So, were you in a traffic accident, bud?” he asked, turning down his dispatch radio before he shut the door.

No, it's bubonic plague. “Yeah.”

“I thought so; the patch is about where you'd hit a windshield.”

Not to mention all the scratches, Sherlock. Phillip pulled the brim back down far enough to cover his head injury. The driver put the automatic transmission into gear and then reached out to start the meter, revealing a faded red and blue tattoo of a patriotic anchor on his upper arm.

Great, I'm riding with Popeye.

“Feelin' all right, bud?” He pulled away from the curb.

“Iine, thanks.”

“Well, that's good. Anybody else hurt bad?”

“Just a pole.”

“Must've been a pole in the ground, hardly any Polaks in Four Rivers.”

Except the old rummy driving this cab.

“Sides me, that is. Frederick Stankewicz at your service.” He smirked into the rearview mirror, showing his crooked, tar-stained teeth.

Got any more Kurt jokes, Phillip?

The driver turned out of the lot and onto the city streets. “My uncle changed our last name to Stanky; I'm Freddy Stanky, almost like Eddie Stanky, the Dodgers ol' second baseman.”

Never heard of him. So? Lighten up, for God's sake. “Hi, uh, Freddy. I'm Phillip Stark.”

“Pleasure. So, I imagine that pole's left in better shape than your car, Mister Stark?”

“Guess so, but I'd prefer not to talk about it.”

“Sure; don't mean to pry. Lotta folks climb in wantin' to tell all.”

He stopped talking to cover a deep cough with his fist. "Kept my own bar twenty years, then I started up this hack thinkin' I wouldn't hear everybody's problems so much. Not so; I've heard just about everything from up here."

Good, then there's nothing for me to add. Phillip just nodded and began to check out the scant amounts of ash in the tidy neighborhoods, mostly middle-income stuccos and ramblers built in the fifties. *Looks like it never hit here.* Freddy jabbered some more, glancing at his passenger in the mirror, but Phillip smiled weakly and looked back out the window. When the talking from up front ceased, Phillip counted the curbs of thirty front yards and felt drowsy as the cab entered the highway.

"Not too long now; you doin' all right?" Freddy asked.

I must look like crap. "Yeah, I'm still fine."

Out in the country, the traffic moved just below normal speed, each vehicle followed by a filmy wake of ash. Phillip scanned the checker-boarded green and grey fields, discovering details he'd missed before. Next to a well-preserved turn-of-the-century farmhouse, he noticed a mound of earth with a wooden door. *An onion cellar? There's still ash on top; no reason to move it I guess.*

At the next farm Phillip watched the wooden blades of an old-fashioned windmill rotate in a slight breeze. *Why haven't I noticed these things?* He went on observing the countryside without hearing from the driver. When they neared Ponderosa, Phillip saw the haze still formed a dingy grey three-hundred-sixty-degree horizon with a ring of blue sky at the middle.

Freddy called back to his rubbernecking passenger. "You stayin' out here with someone?"

"What? No." With three of the four windows down, they were practically shouting to each other.

"Saw you checkin' around. Usually that'd mean a stranger or a camera bug, somethin' like that." The yelling made Freddy expel an especially rough cough.

The third degree. "No, neither one. I live here."

GREY PINE

“Sorry, I can be a nosy ol’ coot sometimes.”

Got that right. Phillip watched a white sports car speed by way over the limit. *Idiot.* He grimaced, anticipating a thick cloud, but Freddy hardly had to brake for a light fog of ash. *It was worse that night; there must’ve been some wind.*

“Okay back there?” Freddy called.

Get a grip, Phillip. He just nodded.

“That fella’s probably got one of those radar detectors.”

“Should be against the law.” They were still shouting back and forth.

“They are. What part of town?” He slowed the taxi.

Phillip saw him in the mirror fumbling around for the cigarettes in his chest pocket. “Ponderosa Estates.”

“Got it.” With the reduced speed, Freddy didn’t have to speak so loud. “You mind if I smoke?”

Mind if I fart? He’s just asking, don’t be a jerk. “If you don’t mind, uh, Freddy, the smoke gets to me.”

“You bet; won’t kill me to wait for one of the buggers.” He let go of the pack and slowed some more for the light up ahead. “‘The devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape.’ My wife used to say that about her Kools.”

She split, or she’s dead. “The Bible?” Phillip asked, now in a normal voice. He wasn’t really interested but doing his best to be friendly.

“Sounds like it, but nope, it’s from Hamlet.”

“Was she an English teacher?”

“Just a big reader; the Bible and Shakespeare were her favorites.”

“Isn’t Hamlet one where they all die at the end?”

“Yup, it’s a gloomy tale, but it was the words she loved. She’d always spot Shakespeare in everyday conversation; she taught me some of the famous lines.” Freddy cleared his raspy throat as he left the highway at the junction, turning on to Pine Avenue. He nearly stopped to avoid a fellow senior in a Chrysler who exited Kurt’s parking lot without looking.

Honk at the ol’ blue-hair.

Freddy's face turned momentarily solemn, then he drove by the retail strip onto the mile of countryside before downtown, well below the speed limit of forty. "Man alive, even with all this ash, the air is better here."

"Fewer cars," Phillip said.

"I like that; hope to live not far from here some day."

"That right?"

"Yup. I know some folks out here, but main thing is to be closer to those mountains; been thinkin' about some land."

"You a hunter?" *Shakespeare-quoting, no less.*

"Not anymore. Stopped after my kids grew up."

"How come?"

"Didn't need the meat, but I still enjoy scoutin' the animals. I think they somehow know when you aren't after 'em. Seen twice the deer and elk since I stopped huntin', and plenty of goats, sheep, bear, even a big cat."

No way. "You saw a mountain lion?"

Freddy grinned as he saw Phillip's interest heighten. "Matter of fact, seen her twice, the same one I'm pretty sure, up on Raging Creek. You know where that is?" He drove slowly by the old school into the center of town.

"Yeah, I've been in on that trail head, pretty busy there. You saw it while you were what, hiking?"

"More like bushwhackin' with my grandson; he's twelve." He looked out at some imaginary traffic problem. "His daddy, my youngest, was in the navy like me; died on a ship comin' back from Vietnam." Freddy paused again, his face grim. "I try not to think about it too much, but it's one thing to die in combat, another from somebody's negligence."

Jesus.

"Enough of that." Freddy reduced his speed even more for the residential neighborhoods.

"Sorry about your son," Phillip said quietly. He watched two

maggies waddle around a yard like chesty waiters in black tuxedos. On every block he saw someone still removing ash in one way or another. *Ask about the lion, but don't be pushy.* "You were telling me about your grandson."

Freddy coughed from deep in his chest. "He's a fine boy. My son actually named him on account of his mom's love for Shakespeare—William S. Stanky."

They didn't. He arched his brow toward the mirror.

Freddy laughed when he saw Phillip's expression. "Just the *William* part, middle name is Samuel. I sort of took over best I could with Willy; help Kate out when I can. Me and the boy even got snowshoes for winter." Freddy cleared his throat again. "Don't know how long I can keep up that part. I'd have more time for him if I semi-retire; get some land up there a ways; go right out my door into the trees when we feel like it, cut down the travel." He passed the last houses and turned onto the state road.

Phillip rolled his windows over halfway up so they could hear. "What holds you back, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Nah, don't mind. Been over two years now since my Myrna died, but it's still hard to think about sellin' the place. Forty years there with the same ol' gal; still got a lot of her stuff."

"Yeah, my dad kept a lot of my mother's things."

"Does he live here?"

"After she died, he went downhill—died this summer." *You're telling him all this? The lion, Phillip.*

"Sorry for you, Mister Stark. The *downhill* part is some food for thought."

Damn. "I didn't mean—"

"Course not. Were you pretty close with him?" He passed the LEAVING PONDEROSA sign and started up the incline.

In another life. "Just when I was younger."

Freddy looked up in the mirror, stifling another cough.

He's waiting for more, or for me to shut up—just tell him. "My mom

died of cancer when I was in high school, then, well, he never adjusted and started to—" *That's enough.* Phillip stared at the ash-cloaked scrub pines on the ridge.

"Sorry to make you think about it," Freddy said.

"It's okay."

"Y 'know, we're all runnin' out of time. Myrna had one for that, too: 'Golden lads and girls all must, like chimney sweepers come to dust.' Don't recall which play that's from. Point is, I better get on with it."

"Get the land?"

"Yup."

"I hope you do." *Pipe dream.* Phillip kept to himself as the taxi made it onto the mesa. The telephone lines next to the road caught his attention. *Is that the pole? Maybe that one. Crap, doesn't matter.* He stretched his neck to see how much ash was in the road ditches, but he couldn't see any.

"Somethin' wrong?" Freddy asked.

"Hm? No." He settled back in his seat. "So where might you be looking for land?"

Freddy spoke to his side mirror. "It's all yours, bud," he said, slowing for an empty logging semi that rumbled by on the left, leaving a faint trail of ash. "Another big hurry. Anyway, I can't be as far up as I'd like. I've been eye'n some property near Blue Valley, maybe I could afford to put in a small cabin and a garage."

"You might want to re-check land values there."

"Why's that?"

"Have you seen the old ranch?"

"The Ponderosa? Don't pay attention much to that place."

"It's being re-developed, very quietly, last I saw."

"You don't say?" Freddy turned into Ponderosa Estates.

"I saw the new foundations—left at the third street."

"Sounds like you know Blue Valley pretty good."

"I sometimes hike or ski up there." *Used to, anyway.*

"When did you see this construction?" Freddy started making his turn at the corner by Mister Beck's house.

GREY PINE

“It’s been, uh . . .” *How long?* “. . . a few weeks—second house on the left. They plan on a hotel, all the comforts; they were even clearing land for a bunny slope and a lake. I think the developers greased some palms and used old permits.”

“Sounds like somethin’ s rotten again in Denmark.”

“My God, there’s my truck.” The wrecker had parked it by the curb; Freddy stopped and they both viewed the damage. At the center of the front bumper the indentation staved so far into the engine that the fractured headlights were inches closer together, making the small pickup look cross-eyed.

Jesus, it’s totaled.

“Man alive, you hit a pole all right,” Freddy said. “You’re lucky it didn’t catch fire. Did you fall asleep?”

No. “Yeah, they said the seat belt saved me.”

“I guess you’re livin’ proof they work. You have insurance?” Freddy asked, and drove on.

“Just liability.”

“Then she’s junk now.” He turned into the driveway.

“Yeah.” Phillip checked the yard as the taxi came to a stop. *Brown needles in my tree—summer shedding—I hope.*

“Mister Stark, could I ask you somethin’?”

“Sure.” *What the hell, already told him half my life.*

Freddy reached over to stop the meter then turned back toward Phillip, the motor idling. “I saw your eyes light up when I told you about the lion.”

“Yeah, I’m interested in wild cats. I had a couple questions for you, too.”

“Figured as much. Are cats related to your work?”

“Sort of. I teach science at the junior high here.”

“A teacher, good for you.” Freddy shut off the engine and covered a raw cough. “I bet your dad was proud of that.”

God. “You’re the second person who said that to me recently. He didn’t care about much of anything, except drinking.” *Crap, don’t leave anything out, Phillip.*

Freddy's neck had stiffened so he spoke through the mirror. "I shouldn't have brought him up again."

"It's all right."

"So, you been interested in wild cats a long time?"

"Yeah, I was supposed to help with some field research this summer, it's postponed for now."

"That a fact? Can you tell me what the research is?"

"Sure." *He's just being friendly; don't bore him to death.* "We were supposed to be studying the lynx up north. Some of them have radio collars, so I had a fair chance of seeing one."

"Never come across a lynx. She's small next to a cougar, little doohickeys on the ears?"

"That's right." He paused to gauge Freddy's interest.

"Any chance seein' one here in our mountains?"

"Very rare this far south."

"What's her highfalutin' scientific name? I'm sure you know it." Freddy smiled at his fare through the mirror.

"*Felis lynx canadensis.*" *Show off.* "Canada Lynx."

"Canada Lynx. Tell me more about what she looks like."

He always says she and her. "Like you said, smaller than a cougar, forty pounds tops, but very long legs for its size; lives mostly off snowshoe hare; black tufts on its ears and a black tip on its short tail, and—" *What the hell—her.* "And her paws, they look oversized like a puppy's—huge and furry for moving in the snow. Her face looks something like a grey tabby."

"You paint a picture of a beautiful animal, Mister Stark."

"Yeah, she's beautiful." Phillip smiled at him. "Forget the *Mister*, Freddy; sounds like school. It's Phillip."

"Okay, Phillip. I imagine the research is because there ain't many left—I mean *aren't.*" Freddy chuckled. "That's the only word Myrna ever got on me about. So how many lynx?"

"The population is still pretty healthy in Canada and Alaska. You really want to know all this?"

"Yup, real interestin' to me."

GREY PINE

“Okay, there’s probably less than a hundred in the Northeast, a few hundred way up in the Rockies and maybe two hundred here, mainly up north in the fir and lodgepole pine.”

“She must be pretty shy.”

“Yeah, wants nothing to do with us.”

“Less forest and more people; survivors go further up.”

“That’s about it. The study is supposed to come up with more accurate counts to qualify them for threatened or endangered status.”

“Ya’ ask me, it’s plain dumb they’re not on the list already. So when is this study?”

“They’re going to try to start up in September.”

“Well, you do some important work . . .”

I don’t do anything.

“ . . . a teacher; scientist. I wish you and the other professors good luck with it.”

“Thanks, but I was just a gofer on the project. The timing is all off for me now because of Saint Helens.”

“Maybe it’ll still work out.” Freddy cleared his throat, fondling his cigarette pack. “Volcano changed a lot of plans, that’s for certain, but how often do we get to see somethin’ like that? You folks really got the brunt out here. What was it like?”

“It was pretty amazing.” *Stop; he wants his smoke, not your little ash story.* “You want your cigarette?”

“I’m okay for now. So how was it here?”

“Like Four Rivers, I guess, except more intense. I’ll never forget going out, pitch dark in the middle of the day, totally quiet, no engines, no people, nothing. The birds were silent, no sign of life except this mouse. I saw him for a couple seconds, and then just his perfect little tracks. The ash didn’t slow him down; he was out there looking for food, trying to survive. Then my neighbor came out, cussing about ash in his precious swimming pool. Right then, if I had to choose between that mouse and the neighbor for a spot on the evolutionary scale, no contest.”

Freddy thought about Phillip's comments a few seconds before he spoke up. "I think I get the drift of what you're sayin'. A lot of my fares complain about the ash; I just listen. The way I see it, we've got nothin' to gripe about. Any of us could've been campin' or workin' over there when it blew. It was a tragedy those people died, but if you pay attention to what else is happenin' it changes how you look at things." Freddy paused, looked at the yard and coughed.

Where's he going with this? Ask how he found the lion.

"Like the heat wave in the South this year," Freddy said. "Hundreds of people already dead, most of 'em my age and older, because they couldn't afford to get out of the heat."

Good God. "Heard something about it, but not much."

"Not spectacular like a volcano, but I see it as damn shameful; it could be prevented," he said with an atypical frown. "All those old people sufferin', just wasted; I guess *expendable* is the word. Suppose that's why we don't hear much. When I think about them, I don't have much truck for people who gripe about the ash. I figure the least I can do is send a few bucks to help out through the Red Cross."

What about you, Phillip? Too busy staring at your damn carpet? "I'm glad you told me; I'll send something, too. I see you have a yellow ribbon on your shirt."

"Don't want to forget them either. Some make it all political, but I see those folks as our neighbors caught up in the middle."

I pray for them, Mister es-Stark.

Freddy probably does, too. "I see what you mean."

"Afraid I'm just prattlin' on here, professor."

Professor; there's a joke. "No, not at all." *How long are you going to BS with this ol' guy?*

"I got us off track; was gonna tell you about the lion."

Okay. "So when was the last time you saw her?"

"Two summers ago, fishin' with Willy. I bet he'll remember it his whole life."

"Yeah. It's amazing you've seen the lion twice."

GREY PINE

“Mostly luck. There’s a pool on the creek there, fair fishin’, but it’s a drinkin’ spot for all kinds of critters, tracks all over. First time I saw her, must be five years ago, I came to the spot and there she was, just slurpin’ away like a kitten. Now every time I go up there I give it a try . . .”

God, maybe he’d let me tag along.

“ . . . sneak in through the woods, downwind and such. Best chance is a hot day; a drink is about the only thing that’ll bring her out in the daytime; but you already know that.”

“What makes you think it’s the same lion?”

“Mainly size, maybe a hundred pounds, a female. I think I could tell her from another.”

“How long were you able to watch?”

“This last time with Willy, maybe five seconds. Had my dogs that day, they spooked her; she was gone like a ghost . . .”

Mister Lopes would love this.

“ . . . but the first time, well, it was like a gift. I sat maybe thirty yards away, behind some trees and bushes on the opposite side of the creek watchin’ her drink. Darned if she didn’t climb up and stretch out on this big ol’ boulder and take a nap in the sun. I watched her maybe a half hour, her ears flickin’ off flies like a house cat. I could count her whiskers through my binocs until she just strolled away like it was too hot.” His story forced out another scratchy cough.

“Man, did you take her picture?”

“You’d need a fancy lens. Watchin’ her meant more to me than a photo anyway.” Freddy reflected a few moments. “Only bothered to tell a couple ol’ friends and the boy; I think he was the only one who believed me. That made the second time real special too, but now the kids tell Willy he’s crazy as his ol’ grandpa.”

“Does he bring a camera now just to prove it?”

“Yup, he does. Might not ever see her again, or maybe we will, but I don’t have nothin’ to prove.” He grinned, revealing a jagged incisor, and Phillip was sure Freddy was confident he would see the cougar again.

Ask to go along. No, you don't even know him. You want a chance to see the cat? “Uh, Freddy, do you think I could see the spot some time, if I promised not to blab about it?”

“Why, you bet, we’d be glad to have you,” Freddy said, genuinely pleased by the request.

Geez, just blurt it right out. “I wouldn’t be imposing?”

“Not at all, but seein’ her could take ten times or—”

“I know, but I appreciate any chance. It must’ve been a little scary being that close; did you carry a gun?”

“With Willy I pack a big ol’ pistol in case I have to chase somethin’ off. I’d be plenty scared if she came after us, but I heard the last fatal cougar attack was way back.”

“The last one in the state was in the twenties.”

“Shoot, we had two, three fatal attacks by yard dogs in Four Rivers just the last couple years.”

“Right. What kind of dogs do you have?”

“Two ol’ mutts. Weren’t much at huntin’ birds, just good companions. What’s your take on huntin’, professor?”

“They have the right if they follow the game laws, but the only thing I ever shot was a can with a twenty-two.”

“That could be awkward for a young man in these parts.”

“Yeah, I’m used to it. Every fall someone asks when I’m going out, and I say I’m doing something else. A few times I got pestered and told them I don’t hunt. Then you get the *he must be queer* look.”

Freddy cleared his throat again. “A few years ago I told some buddies I wasn’t huntin’ anymore; they thought it was my health. When they asked, I told ’em I didn’t need the meat. Like with you, a couple of ’em kept at me until I said I never did care much for the killin’ part anyway. Funny how I found out who was a real friend—the ones I still bowl with; the others avoided me.” Freddy chuckled and coughed.

Good riddance.

“Spent too much time doin’ things because it’s supposedly what men do,” Freddy said. “Take wildflowers; you’d think they’re not a man’s business. I bet you know all about ’em.”

GREY PINE

"I've studied animals more, but plants are a hobby."

"Myrna and I learned some wildflowers before she passed; the boy likes 'em too. You can be our guide when you come with us."

Phillip smiled. "I bet you know more of them than I do."

"Don't think so, professor."

That's me, Professor Stark; this is embarrassing. "Guess I better get going." Phillip picked up the plastic bag, undid his seat belt and opened the door. He walked around the taxi, the bag dangling from his cast as Freddy started the motor. Phillip took out his wallet as he approached the window.

"Your money's no good today," Freddy said.

"Come on, you can't make a buck like that." Phillip held the wallet to his side with the cast and maneuvered out a twenty-dollar bill with his free hand.

"No sir, I appreciate the tip on the land; I'll probably have to look somewhere else. It was a pleasure talkin' to you." He reached out and they completed a firm but comfortable handshake.

"I enjoyed talking to you, too, Freddy. I have an appointment in Four Rivers on Friday at three. Are you available?"

"Sure am, this makes it official," he said, handing out a dog-eared business card. "Ol' fart Freddy's cab. It has dispatch and my own number, but no need to call this time. Pick you up about two?" he asked, then began writing the time in a loose-leaf notebook on the seat.

"That's fine. Are you sure about the fare?"

"Yup. And when you're feelin' better, you give me a call and we'll go on up to Ragin' Creek before the snow flies."

"Thanks, Freddy, and uh, good luck with the land." He awkwardly jammed the card and the twenty into his billfold.

"You take care, professor." He released the hand brake and backed out. Phillip waved once as the taxi passed the wrecked pickup, Freddy lighting up his smoke.

Nice ol' guy, and you had him nailed. After watching the cab disappear around the corner, Phillip went over to the ponderosa and

picked out a handful of dry needles. *This is normal, but it needs attention. Yeah, spray the tree, feed the cat and dig the ash—what a great plan.* He turned to the house. *You forgot the mail. Later, just go in.*

Mister Beck had lowered the garage door, but it was ajar because of the brick Phillip always left at the base for Ali despite Stephen's objections. He walked over, lifted the door and glowered at his father's Chevy. *Sell the damn thing and buy a truck, easy as that.* At the back door there was a bowl of hard cat food on the step, and a note taped to the knob.

Phillip - Have checked each day, no sign of the cat. Hope you're feeling better. Gil B.

"Shit," he said out loud. *Take it easy, Ali'll figure out you're here.* Phillip reached into his pocket for his keys, then discovered he'd left the door unlocked. *Stephen would've freaked.* He entered the house and found mashed white nutmeat, papery brown skins and scores of whole peanuts all over the floor. *Knocked them over that night—seems like a month.*

Indifferent to the crunching under his shoes, he came to his recliner, sat down, dropped the bag and looked at the blank TV. *Lupe must be back. What would you say to her? They think I'm nuts, Lupe, but I start therapy soon—so how was your trip? Shit, stop staring at that damn screen.* He walked down to the den, sat at the desk and glared at the phone. *Wait a few days; settle in. Joann was going to call—last Sunday, I think.* He switched on the ringer. *The doctor said to rest; maybe leave it off.*

He debated with himself about the phone, then stood up and lackadaisically pushed all the billiard balls but the eight ball into the pockets. *Guess I'll spray the tree; look around for Ali.* He tried a few times to ricochet the black ball across the far corner and back into the pocket where his cast rested on the rail. After several more attempts, he finally banked it in and retrieved the ball to go for two in a row. The

GREY PINE

phone rang, startling him, and the hard sphere dropped from his hand to the carpet, clanking on the floor without bouncing. He reached for the receiver and answered with a quiet “Hello.”

“Well, I’ll be. Where’ve you been, Stark?” It was the principal again.

Damn. “Uh, I’ve been sick, the phone was off.”

“So I guess that means you’re better. Okay, there’s a settlement with the association; your contract is in the mail along with a supplementary for the camp in August.”

Bullshit. “I told you I’m not doing the camp.” He felt a shudder at the small of his back.

“You better think about what’s good for you, Stark—”

“Don’t threaten me.” The chill rallied at his neck.

“I wasn’t threatening you. What’s your problem?”

You, asshole. Phillip hung up and flicked off the ringer. “Keep in touch, boss,” he said with a laugh. On his third or fourth stride toward the TV room, his momentary glee gave way to the chill’s onslaught. His head frigid and pulsing, Phillip staggered to his room, sat on the bed and swayed to the design in the carpet . . . *then up and over, back and down again. Up and into the slit, around and back—home sweet fucking home . . .*

23

Phillip relapsed the next day into a double bout with the chill, but Ali's return in the afternoon helped him disengage from the dull gloom of his morning. After lavishing attention on the cat for a while, Phillip decided to make a few calls. He thanked Mister Beck, phoned in a pledge to the Red Cross for the heat wave, and then called Parnell to come for the truck. Phillip salvaged maps, tools, gadgets and parts from his pickup, then an hour later he watched it get hauled away like a dead animal, staring cock-eyed down at the street.

On Friday it took all his resolve to get up and be waiting for the taxi at two o'clock. He sat up front and buckled his seat belt, noticing a long cigarette butt stuck in the soda can under the dashboard. Freddy had on brown work pants, black loafers and a polo shirt, this time a tan one, no cigarette pack in the chest pocket. He backed down and pulled away from the house.

"Freddy, I might drift off on the way in."

"Rest if you need to, professor. Still early," he said, turning the corner. "Want me to pull over a few minutes?"

"I'll be okay; thanks." Phillip leaned his head back and watched Freddy take a peanut from a plastic bag on the seat, crack it deftly with one hand and toss the nuts in his mouth, the shells into a paper sack on the floor.

GREY PINE

“Goober pea?” Freddy asked.

Curious about the term, Phillip wrinkled his brow.

“My folks called ’em that back in Virginia. I read once that *goober* comes from an African language.” Freddy made the turn onto the state road and pushed the bag toward Phillip. “Help yourself.”

“Thanks, maybe later.” They watched a red Mustang pass the cab, leaving behind a fine veil of ash.

“I’ll clam up so you can rest and not be bothered.”

“You don’t bother me, Freddy.” He smiled then looked out the window; they were both quiet on the short drive to Ponderosa. Staring at the passing telephone poles, Phillip fell asleep before they got to the main highway and didn’t wake up until Freddy slowed down to drop him off in Four Rivers. They were in one of the city’s older neighborhoods at a two-story house converted to medical offices.

Phillip thanked him and took the stairs to a short porch, looking down at the new tennis shoes that had been in his closet for months. He also wore clean jeans, a sport shirt and had replaced the ashen Ponderosa hat with his red-orange Portland Trailblazers cap. The Herriot novel he still hadn’t finished was wedged under his arm above the cast.

He walked into the remodeled living room, a waiting area for six health providers; five with academic alphabet soup listed after their names. The last one on the directory was Phillip’s therapist: R. GIRARD, M. ED. Deciding not to claim insurance, he paid the secretary for a session then sat to fill out Girard’s form in one of the black office chairs that lined the walls. He finished, then peeked at the other people waiting: one was asleep; the others flipped through *Business Week*, *Golf Digest*, and *Women’s Day*.

What a lineup. Phillip put the form in his book with Doctor Lang’s letter then looked at the ocean-blue walls, each with two large framed prints of impossibly quaint forest cottages. He noticed that a graffiti artist had enhanced a nearby bland sculpture of some ancient goddess by supplying red Magic Marker nipples to the siren’s white breasts.

A realist; right below a cheesy cottage. He opened his novel, but an endless instrumentation of “Moon River” droned in the background. *Aak, MUZAK.* He tried to read until the therapist came out, fifteen minutes late, and announced with a smile: “Phillip?”

He was less than ten years Phillip’s senior, had a full head of neat dark-brown hair, protruding ears and no sideburn vestiges from the seventies. His most remarkable feature was a steadfast smile that etched permanent creases in his deeply tanned face. The counselor was slender, an inch or two taller than Phillip, and conservatively dressed foot to waist in black oxfords, pleated charcoal slacks and a black leather belt. Tucked neatly into his trousers, however, he sported an incongruous turquoise shirt, brightly patterned with prismatic streaks and blossoms. The silky Hawaiian garment, buttoned near the top, covered most of a gold chain on his neck.

“I’m Roger,” he said.

Cool shirt, but stuffed into the pants? He stood and gave the form to the counselor. “Phillip Stark.”

They shook hands and Roger asked about his teaching assignment as they entered an inner office. Phillip just said, “Junior High Science,” then Roger enthusiastically shared that he left school counseling a few years earlier to strike out on his own.

Phillip was vaguely aware of the brightly decorated room as they sat down opposite each other in matching overstuffed chairs upholstered with chartreuse cotton ticking. *Like sitting in a damn marshmallow—at least I can see his face.*

Roger checked his plastic yellow clipboard. “So, you were referred to me by Doctor Lang?” he said with a blithe smile, his raised eyebrows eclipsed by his dark skin.

What a shit-eating grin. “Yes, here’s a copy of his letter.” Not hesitant to be free of the cloistering chair, Phillip stood up to extract the envelope from his book. He handed it across then stepped back and sat on the wide armrest, crossed right ankle to left knee, his shoe only a few feet from Roger’s face.

GREY PINE

“Snappy looking sneakers, Phillip. A new purchase?”

“M-hm.” *He’s worried I’ll stay here.*

“So are these chairs. Aren’t they comfortable?”

No. “They’re fine.”

As if opening a prize, Roger’s eyes widened as he unsealed the envelope. “I’ll just have a look, if you don’t mind,” he said as if apologizing, and attached the letter to his clipboard.

He must be high on something. “Keep it; I have a copy.”

“Of course, please make yourself comfortable.”

Placing his book on a small glass coffee table between them, Phillip saw Roger look askance for a fleeting moment at the red cap on his head. *He wants me to lose the hat too.*

Roger brought out a plastic orange hammer from behind his chair, put it on the table then began to read the material. Phillip saw the word MELLOWMALLET molded into the handle of the toy. *What’s the hammer for?* He scratched at his dark-blond beard and spotted a yellow smiley-face poster near Roger. *How charming.* He finally lowered his backside into the roomy flaccid chair, resting the cast over his waist, right arm at his side. He removed the hat and placed it on his book. Roger glanced up at the patch on Phillip’s head and gave him a quick approving nod.

Oh what a good boy am I. He took a closer look at the windowless, oblong office. Framed posters and prints of rainbows, flowers, blue skies and cutesy animals adorned the walls, all spotlighted by track lighting that encircled most of the room. Below a rendering of seraphic sunbeams breaking through fleecy clouds, some unabashed wisdom declared: AS WE CHOOSE LIGHT OVER DARK, WE CHOOSE HAPPINESS OVER UNHAPPINESS.

So Roger is Mister Happiness and Light—like the preacher at the funeral. This is going to be just ducky. He spotted another smiley face on a second door, EXIT painted in precise black calligraphy above the top molding. His eye for carpentry detected that the exit was an addition to what was once probably a storage room. *An escape into the alley for his nut cases. Look at this place; you could be next.*

While Roger still examined the papers, Phillip saw a wide maple desk at the end of the office. Bouquets of white daisies in lavender vases garnished three lacquered bookcases that covered the wall from the desk to the entrance. The shelves were jammed with all sizes of books, some close enough to read the jackets. The two gaudiest titles were FEEL GREAT NOW! and NEVER A NEED FOR THE NEGATIVE! *Never? That should be a good one.* He saw some embossed volumes, including *The Holy Bible*.

So what? Even you have a Bible. The closest shelf had at least a dozen inch-thick books with pastel yellow covers: EIGHT STEPS TO JOYFUL LIVING. *That must be his guru.*

Roger moved the papers under a light-blue writing pad and then scribbled notes with a gold-plated ballpoint pen. Still beaming, he looked up. "Phillip, let me start by apologizing for running late, I was on the phone with a client in crisis."

Client? What's this guy selling, insurance? "No problem; I had my book."

"I appreciate your flexibility, it's been a very busy summer. It seems to be that doggone old volcano, especially the ash fall."

"How is that?"

"Well, I think of it as widespread cabin fever from those horribly dark days and the cleanup, so many interruptions to daily life; the ash never seems to go away. It's been very challenging for all of us." The broad smile didn't waver with his complaint.

All of us? "Sounds like it bothered you a lot."

"Well, I've tried not to let it. A week of vacation in the islands was our best decision." Roger's voice lilted when he said, *best decision*, as if everyone had the same option.

Good God. Easy, Phillip. "So you escaped the whole thing."

"Yes, for a while anyway, and we even missed the dreary monsoons; it was so sunny, warm and beautiful. How about you? My gosh, Ponderosa, did you find refuge?" The therapist seemed exhilarated by what they were sharing.

GREY PINE

"I had some plans ruined, but the ash fall was amazing."

"Oh? Good for you, Phillip, I applaud your ability to choose the positive side of *that* experience."

"I didn't choose; that's just how it was for me."

"Well, that's wonderful. Phillip, before we get going, I noticed you were looking over my festive little gallery. I'm happy to report this dark old place is now temporary, but I've tried to brighten things up as best I could."

Farm house. Phillip nodded, trying to act neutral.

"My wife and I just bought a home with a separate apartment . . ."

Blah, blah, blah. As Roger spoke and gestured, Phillip saw a Milky Way of crumb-sized diamonds sparkling from his wedding band.

". . . private entrance for clients; we've started our remodeling and . . ."

Yeah, big bucks rolling in, thanks to the doggone old volcano. When Phillip didn't hold back a sigh, Roger paused.

"I get a bit carried away with my plans; sorry."

You're sorry, all right. Phillip just raised his brows.

"After all, I'm supposed to be the listener," Roger said, trying to jest. He checked his notes, then looked up with animated anticipation. "So, Doctor Lang says you started on medicine for, uh, clinical depression. I guess that's the phrase *a la mode*. I prefer the old word, melancholia."

Sounds like syrupy old music.

"How do you feel about taking the drug, Phillip?"

"Who knows? Maybe the crap will help."

Roger moved his fist to his chest, showing discomfort.

What was that, a repeat from lunch?

"And so you have hopes the medicine will work for you," Roger stated more than asked.

I just said that. "Yes I do," he answered.

"Perhaps it will; I hope so, too." Roger's tone was vacuous. He jotted on his pad then continued. "I don't know a lot about these new

drugs yet, but I do know you've made a choice to be here; that's a very positive step in coping with your daily challenges. . . ."

Like clogged drains and cat barf? Still coping with those.

". . . to be congratulated." Roger crossed his slim legs.

Three cheers for me.

"Doctor Lang referred you to an analyst. How was that?"

"Didn't work out." *I'll spare you the details.*

Roger waited a few moments. "How do you feel about this diagnosis of *suicidal tendencies*?" he asked, reading notes.

Crap. "I didn't try to kill myself."

Phillip's surly reaction seemed to startle Roger. "Well, that's good enough for me," the counselor said in his practiced supportive voice. He was about to continue when there was a loud knock at the exit.

What the hell? There was a second knock.

"Excuse me, Phillip." Roger got up and walked to the back door, peered out, and opened it all the way. A gaunt man in casual clothes, perhaps in his sixties, stepped right in. The therapist backed up then stood his ground in front of the visitor, who pecked around Roger to gawk at Phillip.

Yup, this is where they keep the screwballs, Egbert. Phillip made "big eyes" toward the intruder, who then turned back to Roger.

The two men gabbed for a couple minutes until Roger finally sent him off with "Have a nice day."

Nice day my ass.

Roger returned to his chair, but didn't settle all the way back. He spoke up, chortling. "You just never know when things will come up," he said, expecting Phillip's empathy.

Bullcrap. "While you were having your nice little chat, he stood there looking at me like I was a freak."

"Gosh, I'm sorry. Mister Nugent is the owner; I managed to discourage him from checking the electric panel." Roger sat back and crossed his legs again.

Phillip looked directly at him. "Does he always walk right in or does he know how to use a damn phone?"

GREY PINE

Roger pursed his lips, but the smile endured. "Again, I'm very sorry, Phillip. Please try to relax."

Another jerk telling me to relax.

"I wouldn't be concerned; Mister Nugent's a nice man."

Sure. "That makes it okay?"

"Perhaps we weren't quite ready to communicate, anyway."

My God. Phillip shook his head and looked down at the light-brown pile carpet. *Easy, or you'll be staring at **this damn rug.*** "Can we just get on with it?" he finally said with as much courtesy as he could summon.

"Certainly, Phillip." Roger took a few seconds to regain his thoughts and his cheery demeanor. "Okay then, first I want to say that I like the way you speak so honestly . . ."

I like the way Johnny sits down; same phony BS as student teaching.

" . . . were telling why it didn't pan out with the analyst."

No I wasn't. "Let's just say he was looking for all of these repressed problems from when I was a little kid."

"So you feel your challenges are more immediate than some mysterious complex from your childhood?" A sardonic sneer momentarily replaced Roger's saccharine smile.

"Sounds like you're not a big fan of psychoanalysis."

"Well, it's not really for me to judge."

*Gee whiz, Roger, you **did** judge. So what?*

"So, Phillip, what happened next?" he asked with a half smile as he made another notation.

"After I crapped out," he paused, "with the analyst?"

"Yes, please."

*He cringed again; **crapped out** is too vulgar—thought so.* "I was told to try someone younger; you were elected."

"Well, I'm glad you're with us and . . ."

At these prices, I bet you are.

" . . . hear you saying you want to focus especially on the here and now, and I want to reassure you we'll do just that. If you're ready, please

start with how you're doing now; then only go back as far as *you* think is important."

Something's screwy—get on with it. "The truth?"

"Yes, please."

Let's see what he really wants. "Okay, right now I'm fine, but it takes me half a goddamn day to get this far." Phillip stopped when the counselor's smile receded. *That did it; the shit just hit the fan.*

"Phillip, this will probably be the only time I'll interrupt." Roger put down his fancy pen. "I need to share this with you; it's not a judgment, but how I feel about something that makes me uncomfortable." As he leaned forward to put down the clipboard, the necklace disengaged from his shirt and a solid gold icon of some saint hung momentarily in front of Phillip.

Holy moly. "You don't like swearing."

Caught off guard by Phillip's perception, Roger's eyebrows went up. "It's just a personal preference really, a strain to my comfort zone." He waited for a response.

Even Lupe wouldn't buy this. "Well, I can't guarantee I won't swear again, Roger, and if you're not comfortable with that, then maybe we should just bag it."

"Phillip, we can easily work this out. All I'm saying is I appreciate it when you can hold off." Roger sounded like he was begging. "I understand completely you might slip."

"Why don't you tell me why it's such a big deal for you?"

"Well, the negativity of it tends to distract me and—"

"Even a word like *crap*?"

"A word like that makes me envision, well, *stuff*, coming from the person's mouth."

"My God, that image is more profane than the word."

Roger's head jolted back, his face blank; then he forced a perky smile that didn't fit his bewilderment. "Phillip, I stopped swearing many years ago because I discovered it was just another obstacle that kept me from being in touch with how I really feel."

GREY PINE

“Sometimes it helps me express *exactly* how I feel.”

Roger stiffened, uncrossing his legs. “We could continue without your compliance if necessary.”

“That’s mighty nice of you.”

“Do I sense you feel some dissatisfaction?”

“Whatever you sense, I don’t see why we should go on.”

“Please say more about why you feel that way.”

“Because I don’t buy your explanation. You’re laying your sanctimonious morals on me.”

“You think I’m trying to influence your beliefs? I’m only asking you to respect my personal preference when you can. I don’t think it’s related to my beliefs or yours.” Phillip turned his head toward the cloying visuals on the walls. *Just find out what the rest of his deal is.* “Okay, I’ll try to tone down my *vile* language, but no promises.”

Roger resurrected his smile. “Thank you, but it goes both ways—if somehow I make you uncomfortable, please let me know.”

“Deal. So, are you ready for my little story?”

Roger raised his brows, and Phillip began with an understated account of his life with Stephen, the therapist nodding to every statement. He took no notes and responded occasionally with affirmative rephrasing. After a few minutes, Phillip thought Roger’s eyes were drooping.

Yeah, this is boring; let’s make it more fun for him. He told a little about his mother, making a point of her religion; the counselor perked up and jotted a note. *Thought so; I’ll hear about that.* “So, is that enough background?”

“We can always go back when you think it’s important. Perhaps you can tell me more about your day-to-day situation.”

As Phillip superficially described his sleeping/chill rut, Roger’s grin seemed to grow until he couldn’t hold himself from chiming in with: “So you’re saying in the afternoon you seem to control things better.”

More of his parrot act. What’s he so enthused about? “I have a question, Roger. From the letter and what I’ve told you, do you think I need therapy?”

“Yes, but I’m already confident of your improvement.”

“How’s that? You know next to nothing about me.”

“You’re saying that I don’t have enough background?”

Another frigging echo. “Yes, that’s what I said.”

“If there’s more you wish to share, please go ahead.”

“No, you’ve heard enough to ask a relevant question.”

“Well, my first job is listening, but just let me reassure you that we’ve had wonderful success with similar profiles as yours.”

Phillip glared at a rainbow butterfly. *Let’s see, a profile—depressed offspring of dead alcoholics. That’s D-O-O-D-A—doo-da.*

“Phillip? Will you expand upon how you feel right now?”

“I told you, I’m fine now, and I told you about when I’m not fine.”
Doo-da. “I don’t know what else to say unless you ask me something.”

Nonplussed but maintaining congeniality, Roger said, “Please give me a moment, Phillip.”

As the counselor scrawled on his pad, Phillip’s right arm went to sleep. He stretched it out and read two more slogans on the walls. *HM—HAPPINESS IS A CHOICE. MAKE LEMONS INTO LEMONADE—How sweet.*

Roger looked up, buoyant again. “Phillip, maybe we can move on from how you feel in general to how it felt to tell all that.”

“Didn’t feel like much of anything, like with the analyst. So far, the experience hasn’t been much different.”

“You’re saying it was similar with him? Interesting.”

Hard to believe, huh, Rog? “Yeah, he sat there and said almost nothing, and you just paraphrase everything I say to death. I think it’s starting to upset my, uh—What did you call it? *My comfort zone.* You said to let you know.”

“If I may explain; paraphrasing is how I try to clarify.”

“It’s rewording; you aren’t clarifying anything for me.”

“The idea is for us to be on the same page; to validate your statements and—”

“I don’t want your validation,” Phillip interrupted, and Roger’s

face went blank again. "If I'm going to cut back on swearing, you can do the same with the paraphrasing."

"Okay, Phillip, I'll try not to clarify, but I'm sure I'll slip. Maybe we can forgive each other's trespasses."

"Ah, so the Lord's Prayer is part of your therapy?"

"Just an expression, but I see you're familiar with it."

"My mom was big on that one, too. Okay, now what?"

"Where you go from here is what really matters," he said, thinking Phillip was showing signs of cooperation. "From now on, attitude is everything."

"My turn to paraphrase. You're saying my crappy attitude made me sick. Oop, I said *crappy*, I didn't last very long."

Roger ignored the taunt by scribbling a quick note. "It's not for me to judge your old attitudes, Phillip, but I will be asking you to refocus your decisions and choices through a fresh attitudinal framework." He broadened his smile, hoping for some affinity in Phillip's reaction.

Gobbledygook. "A better attitude." *Who defines that?*

"More like positive attitude. We believe every action is preceded by thought, so let's make it a good ol' positive one," he said as if he expected agreement with the platitude.

What about reflex, instinct? He has zero questions and all the answers. Without comment, Phillip covered his brow with his right hand, peeking through the gaps. He crossed his eyes and transposed the smiley face from the poster to Roger's head. *That's perfect.* He grinned as he lowered his hand, prompting Roger to continue with even more exuberance.

"Phillip, one example is to replace a word like *sick*, which you use to refer to yourself, with a positive one."

How about Stark raving mad? He chuckled uneasily at the private pun he and his mother shared a few times.

"Did I miss something?"

Everything. "What's the point of just changing words?"

"Do I hear you say that thinking of yourself as healthy rather than sick wouldn't be of some benefit?"

“Yes, but that’s another paraphrase; we’re even.”

“With positive thinking we believe it’s possible to find some good in the worst situations.”

“Oh really? Tell that to a rape victim, or somebody whose kid was killed by a drunk driver.” When Roger didn’t respond, Phillip read a poster that said: I’M POSITIVE ABOUT THINKING. *What this is about is **no** thinking.*

“Perhaps we need to get back to you, Phillip. Could it possibly be that you’ve decided to let melancholia have the upper hand, instead of seeking the brighter side of things?”

“So it’s something I can just change my mind about? I have some news for you. I don’t control it; if I did, I’d get rid of it. I think I can get better, but from what I’ve seen here so far, you don’t even understand what I’m fighting.”

“I believe I do understand, Phillip, and our methods can help you with what you said—a way to control your mind, but positively. Will you hear me out on what we have to offer?”

*Warren would say **we** must have a mouse in our pocket.*

“Phillip?”

Made it this far. “Yeah, go ahead.”

“Good,” he said, eager to explain. “Each week, we’ll work on a strategy from our book, *Eight Steps to Joyful Living*.” He nodded to the stack on the shelf. “You’ll also receive exercises and some tapes to take home to help you develop your positive attitude.”

“How much more do I pay for this positive attitude?”

“Excuse me?”

“The book and tapes.”

“Well, the materials are well worth the price.”

“Of course they are.”

Roger didn’t seem fazed by Phillip’s sarcasm. “The first step is to concentrate on the present and avoid the pervasive negativity that’s all around us in places like television or the newspapers. You begin your positive decisions and choices from this point forward . . .”

GREY PINE

With my head in the ground.

“ . . . first we’ll have you concentrate on the afternoons, when you seem to be doing better. With every thought you’ll choose the positive alternative, and I believe your afternoons will soon change from disagreeable into manageable; then enjoyable. Then we take on the mornings.”

Just like that, white man’s magic.

Roger picked up the MELLOWMALLETT. “This is a fun reminder. If those negatives jump into your mind, you can smack ’em away.” He struck the side of his own head with the accordion end of the toy hammer, causing a muffled squeak and a goofy look on his face.

Good God all mighty.

“Here, this one’s for you,” Roger said merrily, handing the toy across, but Phillip didn’t lift his hand to take it.

“No thanks. I assume there’s more to your program.”

“Just getting started,” the counselor said, trying not to show discomposure as he put down the hammer. “One of our main strategies we call *affirmations*. These are positive statements you make about yourself. You repeat them out loud or silently; put them on your mirror, your dashboard, on—”

“I get it, let’s hear an example.”

“Certainly; here’s a basic affirmation: ‘I will be happy; I will dwell on positive thoughts; if clouds fill my mind I will chase them away and fill myself with sunshine.’”

Hogwash.

“Sometimes they are much more specific, like for an avid golfer who’s having a difficult day. He reminds himself, ‘I am a good golfer and I’m relaxed and skillful enough to play at this level.’”

“And he wins the match.”

“Win or lose, he plays with less anger, frustration, and more concentration, improving his chances. Why don’t you try one? For starters, try to speak positively about something in your everyday life you think is causing you difficulty.”

“Let’s skip to the big stuff. How’s this? ‘I’m not sick or screwed up.’”

“Yes, but we want to couch our words positively. Perhaps like, ‘I am joyful that I feel more healthy each day.’”

Phillip laughed. “Do I recite that before or after I thaw myself?”

“I’m not quite sure I understand.”

“You told me you *do* understand. Look, that couldn’t budge my, uh, *melancholia*,” he said, trilling the last word.

“Which is why we start with the ordinary and graduate to the more serious. Perhaps you can try one that might work at school.”

“Maybe you’d better help me out.” *This should be good.*

“I have a whole list of teacher’s affirmations. You could simply start with ‘I’m very proud to be an educator.’”

Bingo. “No can do, Roger.”

“Explain, please.”

“Okay. I’m *not* proud that we *educators* are mostly about rote memory, grades, and useless testing, instead of exploration and curiosity. Let’s see, I’m *not* proud when a teacher gets nailed for molestation, and then my union pays court costs and my district helps the creep teach in another town. And I’m *not* proud that our training is a farce and I have to disguise my teaching because I don’t use the crappy curriculum. More?”

“Do I hear you saying you feel isolated in your work?”

“I don’t know. My point is that repeating your affirmations with one foot in a pile of *you-know-what*, Roger, won’t stop the stink. I’ll take a rain check.”

“I see. Let’s put affirmations aside for now; we have many other techniques.” The counselor paused with another half smile. “One of your assignments would be a forgiveness list where you’re asked to identify three people who’ve hurt you in one way or another. Perhaps you can think of one person now who you think has hurt you somehow.”

“Easy—my neighbor. I’m supposed to forgive him? I can honestly say I hate the bastard.”

GREY PINE

Roger winced at the profanity. “What we use here is visualization technique. You visualize reconciliation by—”

“Nope, I’d never forgive him; and I’m sure he won’t forgive me; call it the opposite of the Lord’s Prayer.”

“I believe you’ll eventually be able to let go of what you think he did. Please trust me, we will be making progress right away,” he said, hanging in there with another smile.

Wasting my breath. Phillip closed his eyes a moment to tone down his contempt. “I don’t think you can help me.”

“Please tell me why you feel that way.”

Do it, but don’t let him get to you. He looked right at Roger. “We’re clueless about each other, we’re both wasting our time because we perceive reality so differently.”

“Say more about that, please.”

“Okay. I see some things you value as illusion—like your ring. Diamonds are controlled by a cartel that spends millions to convince us they’re rare. The truth is they hoard the diamonds in huge piles like Scrooge McDuck.”

“Interesting,” Roger said, not interested. “Would you give me a more personal example of how we see things so differently?”

“The volcano. You saw yourself as a victim of the ash fall and ran away. Now you’re still moaning about it, and I’m still fascinated. So who’s negative?”

“You seem to say that positive thinking for you is tied to deep experiences. I wonder if it’s possible to depend on such experiences to go through each hour of the day.”

“Don’t know, but I’ll take two or three of those instead of pretending that everything is rosy. Since I don’t buy this hocus-pocus, maybe it’s time for me to go.”

“Phillip, I’d like you to know that studies have shown that clients who practice positive thinking describe their lives as happier and more successful than do those from other therapies.” Trying to sound informational, partiality slipped into Roger’s voice. “We also believe they live longer.”

“Yeah? For what, a fancier car, a bigger diamond? So they can watch Lawrence Welk with the *right* kind of people at their condo on a golf course in Arizona? I don’t want to be one of your happy successful people.” *Easy, Phillip.*

“I wonder how that perspective has worked out for you; if sometimes you don’t feel cut-off, even lonely?”

“If I am, it’s not because of how I define success.”

“Phillip, it’s my belief we can handle life’s challenges much better if we emphasize things like the beauty of a rainbow, the warm sunshine or some fresh flowers.” With a beatific grin, Roger gestured with his arm toward the daisies on his bookcases.

More BS. Phillip lowered his head slightly, sighed, and closed his eyes a couple seconds. *Leave—Freddy should be here soon.* He picked up his book and put it on the armrest.

“You seem to disagree, Phillip. I’d like to hear why.”

“Fine.” He sat up straight and looked directly at Roger again. “Your mother nature comes right off of a greeting card: sunbeams, rainbows and pretty dead flowers. You worship light and sunshine, but the rain, cold and clouds are the scary bad stuff. Our religions spell it right out—evil and darkness go hand in hand.”

“So you’re saying that religion encourages us to worship the light and fear the dark and—”

“Yes, Roger, if winter, darkness and stormy weather are enjoyable to someone, maybe *they* are thinking positively.”

“Interesting,” the counselor said again. “May I ask if you don’t enjoy a beautiful, warm and sunny day?”

“Of course, but I like rainy days just as much. Maybe we should take weather for what it is and stop whining about it.”

Attempting to disguise that he felt personally affronted, Roger summoned another smile. “Phillip, would you agree that judging others is a challenge for you?”

“I agree judgment can get carried away, but it’s also true that we’ve both been judgmental since we met.”

“May I hear an example of how I was judgmental?”

GREY PINE

“Sure, let’s see, you judged the analyst and my attitude, and you judged me when I didn’t buy your idea of success.”

“I see. And how have you judged me?”

“You have an axe to grind; you’re trying to sell me something. Whatever your deal is, positive thinking, religion, non-judgment, it’s your business and I’m not buying.”

“From what you said before, it seems your mother had a positive perspective toward life and her faith.” Roger’s sanguine facial expressions finally showed signs of sagging.

“I thought you’d get back to her. There was a lady in the hospital who reminds me of my mother.” Phillip described Maria’s acceptance of the indigenous religion of her grandparents. “. . . people like Maria and my mother can enjoy their spirituality without being hustlers. But most religions operate aggressively on the premise that everybody else is wrong—if it isn’t a mission to convert the heathens or infidels, it’s a holy war or flat-out genocide to destroy them. Now *there’s* some judgment for you.”

Roger checked his watch. “Phillip, do you believe the anger you seem to be feeling now serves you well?”

“Anger has its time and place. Did you hear about the hundreds of old people who are dying in the heat? It’s not in India or Africa, it’s right here, right now, in the South. An elderly man I know told me about it.”

“That’s certainly tragic, but sometimes we invest ourselves so much in the world’s difficulties and unpleasantness that we—”

Phillip spoke right over him. “My friend says their lives are expendable because they’re poor and old. I think he’s right; nobody gives a rat’s ass.” His tone dared Roger to disagree.

“It sounds like it causes him considerable anguish.”

“So? He doesn’t dwell on it, but he’s not afraid of the *unpleasantness*, as you call it. In the real world there are nuts like Hitler and Manson, and, of course, the good reverend Jones leading his flock and all those kids into annihilation.”

“Well, I don’t believe anyone wakes up in the morning with an intent to do harm to others.”

“Be careful where you sleep, Roger. Inhumanity has to be judged and sometimes it takes anger to stop it.” A tinge of the chill pulsed at his nape. *No, not in front of him.*

“Well, I try to deal peacefully with what I can control.”

“Yeah, that’s what the good Christians of Berlin said while their neighbors were exterminated. What you do, Roger, is see no evil, hear no evil, and say no evil. How can you affect inhumanity if you’re not even aware of it?” *Take it easy.*

“I hope my work is my contribution. At some point,” Roger added, his tone pious, “perhaps we have to make a leap of faith to believe in something positive and uplifting.”

Screw you, Roger. “That sounds like a judgment that I don’t believe in anything. I do; maybe you just didn’t listen.” A shiver reported at the back of his skull. *Damn, get out.* He got up, sat on an armrest and looked down to gauge the strength of the chill. “I’m leaving.”

At a loss for words for a moment, the counselor’s felicity completely disappeared. “I didn’t say you don’t believe in anything,” Roger said, sounding defensive.

“You sure as hell implied it.” *It’s colder.* Phillip stood to grab his hat; the chill shuddered and made him sit right back in the soft chair. He sank into its depths and pulled the cap down over his eyes.

“Are you ill, Phillip?”

“Just a headache.” *Get rid of him.* “I’d appreciate it if you’d check for my cab outside. It’s white and black.”

“Of course, I’ll take a look.”

Phillip heard him go out the door. *It’s not that strong; see if you can lick it before he gets back.* He tried counting backwards slowly from five hundred and was almost asleep when the counselor returned.

“Sorry to wake you, Phillip.”

He pushed up his hat. “Just resting my eyes.”

Roger started for the exit. “I asked this, uh, Stanky fellow to come around back,” he said with a hint of derision.

GREY PINE

Why don't you just say Stinky? Non-judgmental my ass. Phillip got his book and stood up.

"He's here now," Roger said, looking out. Phillip ambled slowly toward the door as Freddy walked in.

"Let me help you a little, professor." He came over as if to take Phillip's arm.

"I'm okay, Freddy," he said, but walked beside him to the exit. The counselor was waiting there, his grin wide as the smiley face taped to the door.

"Remember, we always keep this open," Roger said.

Phillip scowled at him. "Yeah, so I noticed." *Calm; it's just waiting back there.* They all stepped into the alley; the cab was parked there, its motor running.

"Whether you decide to come back or not, Phillip, please know that I care about you."

God, his trump card. Phillip stopped walking and looked at him.

"Tell you what, Roger, maybe you should stick with *clients* who buy into your presumptions. Adios."

"I mean it unconditionally, Phillip, I—"

"Listen, bud," Freddy said to Roger, "I think that's about enough from you."

"Right arm, Mister Stanky. Let's go." He walked with Freddy to the old Chevy.

24

Phillip sat in the rear, opposite the driver's side and put his head back. *Forget that jerk; just take it easy.* He tipped his brim over his forehead. *Freddy will understand.*

Freddy drove off and asked if he was okay. Phillip muttered back he was fine and discovered a pattern like argyle socks woven into the front covers. To make sure the chill wouldn't return, he peered down the end of his nose and traced the design. He dozed and then slept until Freddy jostled the car while rolling up the front windows.

Phillip looked out and saw they were already at the outskirts of Ponderosa and the wind was bending the poplars. Though two months had passed since the eruption, the ash was rising again from the nearby forests and unplowed fields. As before, only the ghostly outlines of the roadside businesses were visible in the unsettled grey soot.

Man, it looks like the day after. He rolled up his window, sat back and established eye contact with Freddy in the rearview mirror.

"It's a real shale lifter, professor, but it's drivable." He was glancing back and forth between the traffic and his passenger. "Looks like the ash is still with us for a while."

"Yeah, it does," Phillip said.

Freddy came to the junction, took the state road and settled the cab at about forty. "How you doin' back there?"

GREY PINE

I must look wasted. “Good.” *After that little scene, he thinks you’re wacko.* “Uh, back at that office—”

“There’s nothin’ you gotta explain, but I take it you’re finished with that guy.”

Screw all of them. “That’s right.” *New subject.* “Freddy, what do you hear about that heat wave?”

“They say over a thousand dead now, more each day,” he said with a rare frown, and started up the incline.

“Terrible.” *Hear no evil, Roger? Forget him.*

A car approached and Freddy had to slow for the oncoming ash, but it dissipated in seconds. He resumed his speed and then cracked a peanut.

“That cleared up fast,” Phillip said.

“Just blow-over, nothing like before,” Freddy said around a swallow. “I’d like to ask you somethin’ that’s probably none of my business. You mentioned you have a sister in Portland; she know how you’re doing?” He tried to contain a guttural cough.

She doesn’t even know I was hurt. “No, you’re right, I need to give her a call. You’re a sentimental guy, Freddy.”

“Myrna told me that sometimes; then she’d scold me a little if I got embarrassed about it. Guess I’ll just have to live with it,” he said as the cab made the ridge.

Phillip smiled toward the mirror then watched the silhouettes of telephone poles by the road. In the intervals, the wires were hardly visible in the whirling dust, and each obscure pole looked like a forlorn bare tree. *Which one was it? Crap, say something.* “What’s the deal with the cigarettes in your soda, Freddy?” Phillip pointed to the can below the dashboard.

“After a puff or two I dunk my coffin nails in there.”

“You mean you’re cutting back? Good for you.”

“You’re a good example for this ol’ piece a’ work.”

Yeah, great example.

“That’s Willy Shakespeare again, see if I can get the words right.

‘What a piece of work is a man,’” Freddy said without pretension. “Hamlet again, that’s my favorite.”

“I think you did more than just listen to your wife.”

“Oh, I studied some. Anyway, a story in my magazine said even ol’ smokestacks like me might add some years by cuttin’ back. Figured what the heck, really would like to see Willy grow up; that’s a motivation.” Freddy covered a croaking hack, chuckling because it came on cue. “Right there’s another motivation, but it still ain’t easy—*isn’t* easy,” he added, laughing and coughing at the same time.

“I think you’ll do it.”

“These goobers help, keep my mouth busy.” Freddy ate one as if for demonstration and then slowed for some tumbleweeds gusting across the road. He bent his neck sideways and peered up through the windshield. “This wind’s leadin’ in a storm. I do enjoy a good rain,” Freddy said.

Of course he does. “Yeah, me too.”

“Seen a lotta nice days in seventy years; the best are when it’s crisp and clean after a good rain.”

“Not many people make that connection; most can’t stand anything about rain.”

“Yup. Took me some years to decide that. I’d sell more booze on a wet day, and now in the cab most folks gripe when it rains. Never have figured it out.”

“I have a little theory. I was just arguing about it with that jerk back there.”

“Run it by me, professor.” Freddy passed a ramshackle farm truck overloaded with shucked corn.

“Nothing profound—I think hating rain sometimes is related to fear of darkness. The shrinks have a two-dollar word for it: *nyctophobia*.” *He doesn’t want to hear this crap.*

“Sounds interestin’,” Freddy said, his eyes on the road as a few raindrops dotted the windows.

“I found that term after the preacher at my father’s funeral

blabbered on and on about light and dark. You know, how darkness is evil, conquered only by the light of God. It bothered me.”

Freddy thought for a moment. “When darkness and evil are upon us, fear not,” he recited.

“There you go, they’re synonymous, and most of the other religions push the same idea.”

“And the rain?”

“It wipes out daylight; people associate it with darkness. They want their sunny days. A few days of rain, then a credit card gets them to Hawaii or Mexico, and if it’s raining there—the ultimate downer. The ash wasn’t the biggest problem here with the volcano, it was the darkness; it interfered with the light of spring.” Phillip stopped his rant. *Oh great philosopher, let him say something.*

“See if I get you,” Freddy said, then released the gas pedal and honked at some ravens that wouldn’t leave a road kill ahead. “So the dark and light, they just *are*, they’re not good or evil. Same with the rain, the night, and the ash fall,” he said, the taxi regaining its speed.

“Yes, exactly. It’s unfortunate people die in storms and volcanoes, but that’s all the more reason to respect them.”

“Takin’ nature as she comes,” Freddy said. “Like those ol’ scavengers we just passed—a lotta folks hate ravens, but they do their part, and they fly like hawks when it suits ’em. One of the smartest animals I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, and they get branded as evil, like a black cat.”

“Not real surprising that darkness is paired with evil so much; it’s all through books and scripture. What I have no truck for is when they use it to scare kids and ol’ folks into the fold,” Freddy said seriously.

“Yeah, me either.”

“Don’t need anybody botherin’ me about mortality; already care enough to try and squeeze in a few more years.” Freddy smiled, popped in a single peanut and thought for a moment. “I was actually raised a good Polish Catholic; let it go in the navy. Went to Myrna’s church once in a while, but mostly we studied the poetry of the Bible like we

did the Shakespeare.” The strain from his narrative made him stop for a short coughing fit. “Guess I’m most likely to see God in the things you and me talk about, like the wildlife.” He raised his grey eyebrows, looking solemn. “And I see Him in that boy. Seems to be enough for me.”

“And you aren’t selling it to anybody.”

“Not even to a friend.” He smiled at the mirror. “Myrna was like that, never pushed anything on me or anyone.”

“She must’ve been something,” Phillip said. “I’d like to hear more about her, if you feel like it.”

Freddy cleared his throat. “Hardly mentioned her to anybody since she passed, even my daughters. Maybe it’s time I did.” He checked his side mirror. “Go on, bud,” he said, slowing for a pick-up to go by. “Must’ve been about your age when I decided it was time to leave the navy. I was no bargain, real squirrely, always messin’ with motorcycles n’ guns; drank too much. I took it all for granted before her. She was a clerk in the county offices; I went in there for a permit one day and came out smitten—I’ll skip that part.” Some larger drops splattered the windows; they both looked out at the gathering bruise-colored clouds.

“Here she comes, professor.” Freddy started the wipers. “Anyway, we were poor as Job, and she had his patience. After we settled, it was our kids and her animals. She’d bring home strays, and the kids and I started helpin’ out until half our back yard was a pen for dogs, cats—even a few wild critters. She found good places for most all of ’em. We had some stray kids mixed in there, too.

“No dust gathered under her, always helpin’ folks. She loved all the seasons—practically cheer for a storm like this.” Freddy swiveled his wind wing open to sniff the cool air. “And there was one religious woman who didn’t think evil crawled around in the dark. Sometimes we’d go up in the mountains, talk and watch the stars till we fell asleep—some of our best times.”

Freddy coughed and looked in his mirror at some imaginary traffic problem. “I’m just runnin’ on here, professor, but one thing seems to ring true: Comes to likin’ rain, guess it’s just you and me an’ ol’ Mister McGee.”

GREY PINE

Phillip smiled at the rhyme. "I guess so, but you left something out: Myrna cared about somebody else as much as the kids and the animals."

"Yeah, *now* who's the sentimental one? But you're right—I've been a lucky man." Lost in thought a couple minutes, Freddy drove on until they were a few hundred yards before Ponderosa Estates; he turned onto a gravel driveway and rolled into an alfalfa field. There was no view, just solid green hay and thick mouse-grey mist above. He stopped and then cranked both front windows down a few inches; they heard the thunder rumbling outside. The rain had settled the dirt and ash, pushing a wave of fresh oxygen into the car.

"Take a whiff of that," Freddy said. "You mind if we sit here a sec and watch 'er roll by?" he called back.

"No, not at all." Dollops of rain thickened on the windshield, and Phillip lowered his window a little more and inhaled. "Man, you can breathe it all the way in."

Freddy turned off the engine, and the rain sprinkled their faces as they listened to the downpour pelt the roof. The lightning snapped over them twice, a minute or so apart, followed by cracking thunder; then the storm began to let up.

"That was quick," Phillip said. He opened the window all the way and drew the ozone into his lungs. A slit of azure sky opened in the clouds above.

Freddy rolled his window down. "Yup, we're just on the edge of 'er, but we'll take what we can get, right?"

"Absolutely." He stuck his hand out into the light rain.

Freddy looked at Phillip in the mirror. "I'm probably bein' too nosy again, professor, but I made up my mind to ask if you've got somebody else to go to for some help."

Phillip brought in his arm. "You saw what that place was; do I seem like a wacko to you?"

"Course not. But if you got a problem and don't do somethin' about it, now that wouldn't make any sense."

"I'll just lay it out to you, Freddy. They told me I'm clinically depressed."

Freddy waited in case Phillip wanted to explain. "If I understand it right, that's when depression takes over your life; people can't stop it and can't do what they usually do."

"That's about it. How do you know all that?" Phillip asked, turning his head to face Freddy's reflection.

"A couple articles I read; knew it was true from keepin' bar; had some regulars just like that. They'd change and finally shut down, like cuttin' off a motor, even to people they were close to." His lower jaw moved up and his lips tightened with the difficult memories. "Sometimes I remember them like it was yesterday, thinking I could've—" He stopped talking and lowered his head a little.

"Helped them?" Phillip said, completing Freddy's thought.

"I guess so. Some of 'em never came back from it; drank themselves to death."

Stephen. "I'd bet my dad's house that you helped." *More than I ever did.* "These so-called professional therapists—I've had two now—they could learn a lot from you. You're the only one who helps me sort things out."

"Glad if I can help a bit, professor, but I'm just an ol' fart set in his ways. Who started you with the therapists?"

"My doctor has a whole list; probably all crackpots."

"Guess it can't hurt to try again."

The hell it can't. "The doc has me on some fancy new drugs; I'm going to try to deal with it myself."

Freddy cranked the ignition, then looked up. "If I'm not around town, is there somebody you can call in a pinch?"

"Yeah, some school buddies." *Like Kurt, fat chance.* "I could drive my dad's car if I had to."

"Sure you could, but I wouldn't rush the one-arm driving. You ever need anything, not just a ride, you're welcome to call me." He backed into a "y" turn and started out the gravel lane, wet alfalfa bent to the ground on both sides.

GREY PINE

“You don’t have to feel obligated, Freddy.”

“Not an obligation; I take it as an honor when you call me—somebody who does the kind of work you do. You and me, we just sort of hit it off; we look at some things the same way. It pleases me if there’s somethin’ I can do for you.”

“You’ve been a lot of help today, I appreciate it.”

“That’s what friends are for, professor.”

25

The day after the ride home with Freddy, Phillip had what he thought was a pretty good day. The early chill was the usual, but after the second one he was up to stay before one o'clock, figuring out a way to work on the ash in back.

He started by jamming a heavy-duty snow shovel under his right armpit to push the ash into piles. After making two good mounds, he realized that one-armed wheelbarrowing was out of the question. Phillip went to Stephen's shop and in less than an hour built a makeshift hauler out of scrap plywood and an old wagon they used for moving trashcans.

He devised a procedure to drop the cart on its side near a pile then shove in as much ash as possible before righting the box and rolling the load down to the street. Repressing any thoughts of his mental state, Phillip concentrated on the labor into the late afternoon, ignoring the mail and leaving the phone off again. That evening he felt that maybe he had taken some first steps in dealing with his situation, hopeful that the drug was starting to help a little.

On Sunday, after nightmares about Stephen and two rough stands against the chill, he sat up in bed and checked the clock. *Crap, it's two thirty, so much for progress—didn't even get up for Ali.* He walked idly

GREY PINE

into the bathroom, looked in the mirror and removed the dressing from his forehead. The swelling was gone and the gash had crusted over at the center of a yellowish-purple bruise almost the size of a tea saucer. He put a long Band-Aid over the stitches, making a diagonal line across the injury like a no-parking symbol.

Phillip relieved himself and got dressed; then he walked straight to the TV room to look for Ali. The cat had staked permanent claim to Stephen's recliner and was curled up there sleeping, though he hadn't eaten. Phillip sat in his chair and stared at the blank TV until he began daydreaming of passing the telephone poles on the road from town.

Stop this. You didn't do the tree today; the ash is just waiting. He petted Ali, but the cat didn't stir. *Must've eaten out last night.* He went to the garage for the sprayer, opened the double door and walked out front.

Phillip stopped as soon as he saw the yard. *Son of a bitch.* Someone had driven across his and Mister Beck's property in the night, making deep ruts in their adjoining lawns. The small fence around the ponderosa was run over and the tree bent halfway down, cracked in the middle.

In front of Beck's place, a county sheriff's officer shooed off some gawking kids then got into his squad car and drove up the Stark's driveway. Phillip stood there, sprayer in hand, as the cop looked out his window from beneath the flat brim of a brown "Smokey" hat, his face fresh and eager; cheeks the color of bubble gum.

"Mister Stark?" the young sheriff asked, and Phillip nodded. "Something wrong with your phone, sir?"

It's off. "Didn't hear it, I guess."

"Your neighbor filed the report on this mess. You didn't happen to see or hear anything unusual after one A.M.?"

"No, nothing," Phillip said, glaring at the ponderosa.

"Anyone have a grudge against you, Mister Stark?"

Kurt maybe. Fike? He shook his head, still facing his tree. "Find who did this," he mumbled. *Don't tell me the bastard's name.* "I'd kill him," he said under his breath.

“What did you say, Mister Stark?”

He looked at the cop. “Nothing, talking to myself.”

“You seem pretty angry about this, sir. We’ll do what we can, but it’s just a dead lawn and a scrawny tree.”

Bullshit. Phillip turned away again. “Yeah, it’s no big deal,” he said, trying to sound agreeable.

The officer got out, surveyed the damage, then double-checked Phillip’s phone number. When the squad car pulled away, Phillip inspected the tree more closely and stared at the globs of sticky sap oozing slowly onto the ground.

Got all that sap ’cause it’s like the tree is bleeding.

He lifted the top of the ponderosa’s trunk back in place then let it go; it fell even closer to the ground. *Damn it to hell.* Trying to decide what to do, Phillip walked slowly around the tree two or three times.

Screw that dying piece of crap; water my lawn.

The corner of his eyes moist from anger, Phillip walked to the garage for cloth tape, then came back to the lilacs and yanked up a plant stake. He secured the long dowel to the trunk of his tree. *Shit, now we’re both splinted—it doesn’t have a friggin’ prayer.* The chill began to overtake him so he went inside to his carpet.

When Phillip got out of bed to stay the next afternoon, it was almost four, the latest he’d slept since high school. He decided there was no choice but to call Doctor Lang, who arranged an appointment with a therapist for two days later. Phillip left a message with Freddy’s dispatcher, then didn’t go outside the rest of that day or the next, spending most of his waking hours with the TV, his cat, and the chill.

On the ride into Four Rivers late Wednesday afternoon, they talked about the damaged yard then mostly about cougars, and Freddy repeated the invitation to visit the creek when the time was right. Phillip was feeling better by the time he had to get out at the building downtown. He stepped alone into a fusty elevator the size of a bedroom closet, and his dread for the appointment deepened floor by floor up to the fifth.

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Phillip found room 508, a plain door with a COME ON IN sign on the knob. He knocked anyway then entered and shook hands with the new therapist. Bill Rhodes was in his mid-forties, clean-shaved; his curly light-blond hair circled a sunburned balding pate that was radiant as a pink tea rose. His clothes were informal but neat: a light-blue short-sleeve dress shirt, black khakis, no tie, a thin black belt, and dark-brown Hush Puppies. Bill's husky six-foot frame and very light complexion reminded Phillip of Sam Luke, and the similarity bothered him.

They sat on opposite ends of a curved, firm living room sofa; Phillip left his hat, book and light flannel shirt on a cushion between them. Bill inscribed notes on five-by-eight cards as Phillip studied a photo enlargement that papered most of the wall above a simple metal desk. He transported himself into the poster's window-sized image of a subalpine meadow, wild with bright flowers. *Lupine, tiger lilies—fantastic. Penstemon and paintbrush—just stay here.* He enjoyed the forest scene another minute or so before checking out the rest of the small square office.

The other three walls, laminated with mock wood grain, lacked decoration except for a cork bulletin board by the door that overflowed with happy snapshots of family trips to the mountains and shore. A four-foot-long fluorescent light illuminated the whole room, and a rumbling air conditioning system rattled the floor registers intermittently, leaving the air too cold, even for a warm day at the end of July. Hazy sunshine filtered through a single shut window that faced west overlooking downtown.

Feeling an ordinary chill, Phillip put the flannel on over his dark-blue tee shirt while the therapist continued to take notes from Doctor Lang's letter. Below the giant poster, Phillip noticed a spray-painted twelve-by-twelve garden block serving as a bookend for a small desk library. He realized the molded form in the white brick was a *fleur-de-lis*.

That's two good omens, one bad. What crap, Phillip. A desk phone and a large Webster's blocked his view of half of Bill's books, but to the

right of the dictionary he made out the titles of *African Genesis*, *The Third Wave*, *Chesapeake*, *The Dead Zone*, a thesaurus, and about a half-dozen pocket editions of poetry.

The crackpot books must be on the other side. As if it had fallen from the wall, a framed diploma sat crookedly on the books. Phillip squinted to read it. *Ph. D.—probably not an official shrink. Doesn't mean he's not into it.* He focused on a lacquered redwood burl on Bill's desktop, the works of an electric clock protruding from its carved out middle. *Ugly.*

"Phillip?"

"Yeah, I was, uh; that's quite a clock."

"It's one of those well-meant gifts, but it's starting to grow on me. I saw you looking at my wall. That photo's a favorite; sometimes for a break, I think of it as my view."

And just take off, like I did. Phillip was close to the narrow window and got to his feet to check the real view of drab buildings and rush-hour traffic. "I can see why," he said and turned back to the meadow. "Is it your own shot?"

"Yes, near Mount Hood." Rhodes handed back the doctor's letter as Phillip sat on the couch.

"You don't want a copy?" Phillip put it on his book.

"I wrote what I need, and he gave me a brief report on the phone. He said you wanted to talk about the other therapists. Up to now they're anonymous, and I'd prefer to keep it like that if you still want to discuss them."

"Fine, I just want you to know why they were a waste of time." *Maybe it'll cut some of the crap.* "You're not into analysis, are you?"

"No, I'm not. Any other concerns?"

"Yeah, try not to tell me to relax while I'm here."

"That's not helpful I take it."

"Not when it means get with the program."

Bill thought about Phillip's comment. "I think I see what you mean. Shall we begin?"

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Can't be worse than the others. "What about your fee?"

"No charge unless you make a second appointment."

"Sounds fair." Phillip crossed his leg, ankle over knee, glaring at his boot. He remembered putting them on with a vague notion of going on a hike somewhere. *Stupid idea.*

"That's quite a bruise up there," Bill said, looking at Phillip's head. "How's the arm?"

"Child's play." He did fake calisthenics with his cast.

"Good." Bill smiled at Phillip's silliness. "Okay, maybe you can fill me in. I'd like you to go back to when it seemed like you more or less had things together; further back if you think it's relevant. Then, of course, the march of events leading to now, including what you want me to know about your previous therapy. Are you up for all that?"

Déjà vu. "Why not?" he said with a slight sneer.

"Okay. I might interrupt for an occasional question."

"And to paraphrase what I said?"

"No, assume I'm with you unless I say otherwise."

Two points for Bill.

The therapist's phone rang. "Sorry," Rhodes said, miffed by the call. He stood and took one long stride and a short step to his desk. "This'll only take a second," he added.

Sure. Phillip groomed his fair beard with his hand.

"Hello," Bill stated firmly and waited for a reply. "Pam, I'm with my last appointment; I didn't forward the phone, my mistake." He listened a moment. "Thanks, Pam, I'll call after five. Bye."

So Bill scores another two.

Rhodes pushed buttons to disconnect then opened the nearby door and reached around to display the other side of his sign. He returned to Phillip. "That should take care of it," Bill said with a touch of exasperation as he readjusted himself on the couch. "Okay, Phillip." He picked up his thin stack of cards.

Haul out the ol' thumbnail sketch. In about twenty minutes, he divulged a brief autobiography and an account of his recent life,

including blunt, critical summaries of his two experiences in therapy. Rhodes asked for clarifications, concentrating on how the chill emerged and Stephen's avowed dual personalities. Phillip responded succinctly, and the therapist continued his questions.

At least he wants to know something.

"... said after you called your sister there was some brief improvement. Would you give me some details on that?"

"Yeah. The next morning the first chill wasn't as bad, and when I finally got out of bed, I was all psyched to work. Selling the house gave me something to do, I guess. The next day I actually got up early, then my principal called and gave me trouble about not sending in my commitment letter."

"Are you thinking about leaving?"

"No; I don't know. He also volunteered me for basketball camp. Normally, I probably would have done it, but not like I am. I lied that I couldn't do it for family reasons, but he didn't back off. I was pissed; the chill came back in spades, and the next day I was back to square one. He called again right after I got out of the hospital. Same argument; this time I hung up on him."

"Isn't there someone in administration you can talk to?"

"The assistant superintendent, but she's powerless; they make sure of that. What would I tell her, anyway? You can't say you're being treated for depression to an employer."

"Explain that to me," Bill said.

"I remember the stigma when it leaked out about a guy at work, as if he was goofing off. People think it's just a downer; this happened, that happened; you get depressed, it's lousy and it passes. But this crap isn't anything like that; it's regular, it's relentless; it completely takes over."

Aw, poor baby, get a goddamn grip.

Go to hell.

"Did you finish your point, Phillip?"

"Sorry. Most people think you should just get a grip, especially a man. I tell myself the same thing sometimes." He finished with an

agitated sigh, rotating his ankle nervously, the black sole of his boot toward Bill.

“As far as what people are thinking, Phillip, we can only guess, of course. But in general, not only do most people not know about serious depression, they don’t care to find out. ‘Depression is too depressing,’ is a comment I hear often. You’re right about the stigma, too. It’s socially acceptable to have, say, liver disease, but it’s somehow shameful to have severe depression, which kills a lot more people.”

Suicide. “Is that right?” Phillip was unimpressed.

“Yes, and psychology has a deficiency of scientific knowledge on the disorder, though we often lack humility on the subject. Genetics and chemical imbalance in the brain seem to play a part, but what we know for sure is that one source is intense personal trauma. Someday we’ll understand more about how the mind shifts from grief or dejection, which we all have to deal with, into extreme depression and loss of control, like the chill you’ve described, or even worse, self-destructive behavior.” He searched for a card.

Suicide again.

Bill looked up. “What you said about men and depression reminds me Hemingway supposedly wrote the only real sports are bullfighting, mountain climbing and auto racing. I think we’re wrapped in so many layers of that kind of macho nonsense that the idea depression can be such a killer is laughable to some people, especially men. Extreme depression . . .”

More damn suicide; don’t lay it on me, Bill.

“ . . . disproportionate between women and men because so many men are ashamed to admit it, let alone seek treatment.” He paused to consider the statement then scribbled on another card. “Excuse my little speech. Phillip, is it fair to say that acting on anger is relatively new for you?”

Sounds like Roger’s bull. “You could say that.”

“When did you first notice it?”

“I started telling Stephen off a few months before he died.” Phillip

sighed audibly. “So my anger is the problem, right? I just need a positive attitude; forgive Stephen and Mick, and then see the holy light—I’ll be all set.”

Bill waited to see if he’d exhausted his sarcasm. “Well, attitude is important, Phillip, but I don’t subscribe to the old saw that attitude is everything.”

“That’s good, because the chill is there twice a day, every day, like clockwork, regardless of my attitude.” He was emphatic but not vehement.

“How often has it shown up outside of the regular onset?”

“I’ve, six times maybe, but those are the *only* times anger could’ve been a factor. I argued with the other therapist that being angry about a blatant injustice, like Freddy’s old people I told you about, was sometimes necessary. I told him that kind of anger was unrelated to my problems.”

“I agree. A commitment against inhumanity seems more like caring or passion to me.” He looked down to jot a note.

Is he patronizing me? Calm, Phillip. He waited for Bill and gazed up at the meadow again.

“Phillip, one of those times anger *did* bring on the chill was at the store that night, before the crash, right?”

“Yes.” *I let the pissant get to me.*

“Can you tell me a little more about the crash itself?”

“It’s pretty simple. That jerk passed me, I couldn’t see; I went off and hit a damn pole. Doctor Lang makes such a big deal out of it, but that’s all there is to it.”

“Was it just your friend who angered you?”

“That driver.” *And Stephen.* “And my father, I guess.”

“Explain that, please.”

“Not sure I want to; the shrink was convinced I talk to little green men. I recall things Stephen said; I did it that night; I did it a minute ago. Sometimes I react in my mind, but I know it’s not actually him. Once in a while I tell him off out loud—that makes me schizo?”

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“No, it doesn’t.” He paused. “Phillip, I’m not clear on your father’s accident. I assume he’d been drinking?”

“No, Dad was driving.” *He’s going to love this.* “He left me a suicide note, but don’t start laying any genetic crap on me.”

“I won’t. Have you told the authorities about the note?”

“I think my sister did after I told her.”

“How did you react when you first read it?”

“With a damn chill, what do you think?” *Easy.*

“It’s a normal reaction to be angry with a loved one who commits suicide.”

“I was pissed at myself, too. I should’ve helped him.”

“I disagree with that. I think you kept the promise you made to your mother; you hung in there, tried to communicate, and to get him to seek help. It seems to me you cared for him as much as anyone could.”

“Yeah? The shrink said I repress aggression toward him.”

“You didn’t buy that and I don’t either; we’re not all doomed to tragically hate our fathers. I think you also did the right thing to call the analyst on the ECT, but I don’t need to go into that now.” Bill paused again to get back on track. “I believe the truth is you loved your father.”

“Sure I loved him, but I hated Stephen.”

“I won’t minimize how difficult it was to live with him, but drunk or sober, he was still one person, and I don’t believe you hated him.” Bill halted his discourse so Phillip could evaluate the comment.

He doesn’t get it; nobody does. The floor registers vibrated and Phillip felt another unnatural wave of cool air that mimicked the chill.

“Phillip, you seem to have distorted him into this Jekyll-and-Hyde personality. It’s my guess your father wasn’t so oblivious when he was sober, nor was he quite so evil when he was drunk. It was black and white to you, but like most of us, he probably lived his life somewhere in between.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t for sure, I’m going by what you said. It also appears you’ve distorted your thinking in some other ways.”

“I don’t have any idea what you mean by that.”

“I’m talking about assumptions not based on reality; they’re sometimes twisted, exaggerated or irrational and often build upon themselves, which deepens depression, in my opinion. They’re called mental distortions.”

“That sounds nuts all right. Listen, I do have my own way of doing things, my own interests and opinions. It doesn’t mean—”

“Phillip, excuse the interruption, but I’m not talking about your individualism or independent thought. You’ve been under intense personal stress, especially the long-standing environment with acute alcoholism, then his death and other issues related to it. In dealing with *those* things, you seem to have distorted some of your thought processes.”

“Like seeing him as two different people.”

“Yes. Another distortion I think you’re struggling with is unfounded self-blame. It appears you’ve convoluted your thinking into excessive amounts of guilt, convincing yourself for years you were responsible for your father’s behavior, but it was his life, not yours.” Bill flipped to a card in his pile. “Your best friend, uh, Warren. He was on the money when he told you the accident wasn’t your fault. And that goes for the rest of what your father did.”

“Just more words, I can’t accept that out of the blue.”

“Of course not, it’ll take time. What I do is help you pinpoint thinking that was possibly distorted; but it’s your decision whether or not the idea holds water.” Bill stopped when he saw interrogation in Phillip’s face.

“So *decision* is the big buzz word. The other guy told me more or less that I *decided* to be depressed. He said every action follows a thought, so you can always decide on a positive one, something like that.”

“That’s an extreme proposition in my opinion. Real decisions and choices are often difficult, unhappy, or have tough consequences. So-called *positive thinking* can sometimes be beneficial for people who seek

a prescription for life, but you wanted no part of it because you thought it was doctrinal as well as contrived.”

Bingo. “And your distortion deal, isn’t that doctrine?”

“In a way. It’s an approach with some structure developed by psychiatrists disenchanted with psychoanalysis for some of the same reasons you mentioned. But identifying distortions is one of several techniques I use for both normal and extreme depression, because no approach has all the answers. I’ve also found that distortions overlap, so I de-emphasize the labeling from the approach.”

Bill the maverick. *Just shut up and hear him out.*

“Nevertheless, Phillip, I think this technique can be especially helpful for you because you seem willing to examine your thought processes. Your sister’s situation illustrates what I mean. It appears she figured out she hadn’t been telling herself the truth about her husband for years. She was personalizing his abusive behavior, seeing herself as the cause, an unfortunate but common distortion. I’m sure you’ve heard Shakespeare’s famous line, ‘To thine own self be true.’ Your sister learned that, as does anyone who untangles a distortion,” the therapist said earnestly, but Phillip snickered.

“What is it?” Bill asked with a smile.

“Freddy’s a fan, he has half of Shakespeare memorized.”

“Ah. He seems to be a remarkable person.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Phillip, a distortion is to thine own self be *false*, which is what I think you did when you told me Warren’s friendship is the only one you have left. The improving relationship with your sister, and the new ones with Maria and Freddy, say a lot.”

“They don’t know me.”

“You don’t give yourself any credit, Phillip.”

“Like the way I handled Lupe?”

“We all make mistakes; what matters is if you still care for each other. It’s possible she’s tried to communicate; you’ve been isolated a lot.”

“She made things pretty clear when she left.”

“I wouldn’t burn that bridge until you know more. If it is over, then you can go on.”

“Yeah,” Phillip said, his face downcast. “So, is that all of my distortions?”

“Well, I’m very concerned about whether you’ve been honest with yourself about one more thing: Have you really tried to examine your thoughts from just before your crash?”

Shit. Phillip looked up. “So you think I tried to kill myself, too? You know, the other therapist was a complete sap, but at least he believed me.” He shivered and buttoned up his shirt. *No, it isn’t coming; it’s just cold in here.*

“What I asked is whether or not you’ve tried to deal with exactly what happened. You’re the only one who knows.”

Son of a bitch, that does it. He picked up his things.

“Phillip?”

“I don’t want to get pissed and turn into a mess on your couch.” Phillip stood and put on his cap.

“Are you having symptoms now?” Bill got to his feet.

“Not yet, but I’m leaving.”

“Are you sure that’s what you need to do?”

“Yeah, that’s what I need to do.” He walked to the door.

“I think maybe I overdid it for the first day, Phillip. Please call me if you want to continue.”

“Nothing personal, but I don’t think so.” He left the office and took the stairs, galloping down the flights recklessly without looking at his feet. *None of them can help.* He walked through the small lobby to wait out front where someone had planted flowers in the oval island formed by the drop-off lane. Bunches of black-eyed Susans survived the warm summer there, shaded by red and pink cosmos and some desiccating sunflowers.

Phillip sat on the curb and shivered again, though the early evening air was balmy. He put the appointment with Bill out of his

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mind by concentrating on a goldfinch that perched on one of the drooping sunflowers. To get at the seeds, the dainty little bird stretched all the way over and upside down; Phillip mused that the finch's two main colors were about the same as ash and yellow ribbons. He watched it lean and nibble several times, but the therapy session came back to him. *He did make more sense than the others. Screw it; you're on your own—face it.*

26

When the cab arrived in the lane, Phillip felt a hint of the chill as he climbed up into the back seat. “Hi, Freddy.” *I don’t want to talk.*

“Hey, professor,” Freddy said and drove off.

To keep the chill at bay, Phillip leaned back, closed his eyes and dozed fitfully for most of the trip. Freddy kept to himself until he passed Ponderosa and settled his taxi well below the speed limit on the Ski-Eden road. When Phillip’s eyes flickered, Freddy cleared his throat and spoke up.

“Feelin’ all right?” he called into his mirror.

“I’m fine.” Phillip straightened his spine, but the chill stirred between his shoulder blades. *No, goddamn it, not after all that sleep.* The frigid tingling advanced to the back of his neck.

“You sure you’re okay, professor?”

Professor, my ass. “Maybe you could ease off on the *professor* thing.” *And get this heap moving.*

“Okay, uh, Phillip.”

God, Phillip the prick. Easy, we’re almost there.

Freddy slowed even more to make it a relaxing ride.

What’s he doing? “Could you step on it, please? I need to get home.” *To my carpet.* The taxi accelerated, but to Phillip the last mile

seemed endless as he tried to hold off the chill by focusing on the diamond patterns in the seat covers. *No good, it's worse.* Freddy hacked out a cough as he turned off the state road.

"Your appointment go okay?" he asked in the mirror.

"What?" Phillip asked, annoyed by the interruption. He had one hand over his eyes. "Maybe you'd be better off if you didn't worry about me." *Crap, stop barking at him.* Freddy made the turn down Phillip's street and sped up to the garage. *Just get out.* He climbed down, every muscle seemed to ache, and he walked stiffly as if it were his leg in the cast.

"You need anything, call me," Freddy offered from behind, but Phillip was already moving slowly toward the garage.

All I need is my damn carpet. He wanted to hurry, but the house seemed to be agonizingly distant, and he forced himself to make one step at a time through the garage and into the kitchen.

When Phillip finally got to his bed, he tried to rid himself of the chill. After tracing the design scores of times, he fell into an agitated slumber that brought back the caricature of Mick laughing again at Stephen's slaughter.

Me and your ol' man was peas in a pod.

Shut up, prick. The images faded and Phillip opened his eyes, realizing right away the chill hadn't completely subsided. *Get rid of it.* He sat up, stared at the carpet again, but found only slight relief. *Damn, now what?* Phillip staggered out of the room and tried Stephen's door. It didn't open; he dug into his jean pockets with his good arm, but his sluggish efforts were fruitless until the third attempt. The keys hefted like iron, blurring together in his hands until he finally opened the door.

He approached Stephen's bed. *Maybe here.* Phillip sat on the edge, leaned sideways and drew his index finger slowly along the pile labyrinth in the yellow chenille bedspread. *This has to work—down, around, to the right, out, and in . . .* On his knees and one elbow, he traced the thin pathway until the chill receded some. He became

drowsier with each loop; a murky vision of Mick materialized again. *Screw him; keep going—up, over, around, and in . . .* After several more seconds, his finger came to an obstruction, the old revolver. *I shouldn't have left this thing here.*

Phillip picked it up to get it out of the way, but he held on to the loaded weapon and stared at it. *Never shot one of these. Just pull the trigger, idiot. He'll be out there sometime today, half-hammered, fooling around in his yard nonchalant as hell. I wonder how cool he'd be if I—* The chill rallied at full strength; he put the firearm behind and returned to his course in the bedcover.

. . . up and over, around, and back again. Keep going—left and down again, back and around . . . In a couple minutes, the track brought him back to the gun. *There's an omen for you. Such BS, Phillip. No, no it isn't; find the prick.* He grabbed the pistol and left the room. The chill was there, but somehow he moved more quickly than he had for hours.

“Where do you think you're going?” he asked himself out loud in the kitchen. *Just go.* Phillip crossed the poolroom, opened the sliding doors and stepped down onto the patio slab. *You can't do this.*

Can't stand up to him?

I'll do more than that, Stephen. He waded through the deep ash to the crab apple tree then hopped onto the makeshift riser to peek over the top of the fence. *Bastard's not there.* He took a longer survey of Mick's yard. *What did you expect? Wait for him.*

Like a seventy-eight RPM record switched to forty-five, his thinking stalled. His temple chilled again and Phillip slouched onto the steppingstones, wrapping the cast around his waist. He bent forward, head between his knees, and saw a bush surrounded by worm tracks in the crust. As if stalking an ant, he aimed the pistol down to follow the tiny arcs and segments made by the worms that once slithered over the ash.

. . . around and up, curl and over, spiral down and over, then up and—How did worms get up here? Across and around—Tunneled up

through the ash? Why do you even care? Still cold, keep going—over and down, another curl and back up . . .

He swayed for several minutes and then paused. *That's better—now around and up . . .* After a few more seconds, Phillip heard a weed-eater start up in Mick's yard. *There he is; move it before the chill rallies. What if you do this? His word against yours—hide the gun in the ash. Doesn't matter; nothing matters except scaring the piss out of him; see if Mister Nonchalant's eyes get real big.*

He climbed up onto the bricks and peered over the fence, but the yard was out of focus. Halfway across the huge lawn, Phillip saw Mick's back, his arms swinging the trimmer side to side. *He looks small—crap, do it. Wait for him to turn.* He tried to raise the gun but its weight increased tenfold as the chill revived. Phillip struggled to lift the weapon high enough to direct it across the yard. He heard the trimmer stop and watched the blurred neighbor kneel sideways to fix it. *It's colder—you're out of time.*

Phillip steadied the cast and his other arm on top of the fence, both hands on the gun. *Go on.* He saw the dull image of Mick yanking on the starting cord. *You'll hit him. That's the idea. No, you were just going to scare him. Bullshit, he took Dad; you take him. Hold still, prick.*

His brain trembled but he moved his index finger slowly to the narrow steel on the outside of the trigger guard. Phillip started to move his finger into the trigger, but for endless seconds it didn't respond, frozen to the metal like a kid's tongue on an icy monkey bar.

. . . your actions just before the collision.

What?

Have you really tried to examine your actions just before the collision?

Shut up; you're no help. He tried to concentrate on the neighbor, who was tinkering again. *Now—do it now.*

To thine own self be false.

Leave me alone.

*Just before the collision, just before the collision, just before the—
Shit, be quiet.*

Distorted thinking.

No.

A distortion, Phillip.

It's the chill; I can't stop it. It's so cold the speedometer's out of focus. Why's that guy hiking in the ash? He can't help you, idiot. God, headlights right behind—not again. The bastard can't pass me this time—hit the gas. Damn, can't see anything—off the road—there's the pole.

Always does the job.

Step on it. Looking down the gun barrel, Phillip saw the dim target begin to turn in his direction. *Yes, step on it.* His finger finally touched the trigger.

Step on it? The neighbor almost faced him. *You did it, Phillip, you did it on purpose. Jesus.* Tears swelled and ran over his face. *My God, stop this now.* He tried to pull back the gun, his arms hardly budged; he looked into Mick's yard. *What the hell? He is short.*

Phillip blinked to see better, but the top brick slipped; he wobbled back, catching the top of the fence with his cast—all in slow motion again. His knee struck a plank, the pistol flipped up, misshapen, floating above him as if supported by helium. *He'll see it.*

Reacting to the noise, the neighbor had spotted Phillip, who regained his footing and watched the Daliesque gun tumble interminably through the air and descend into the crust below, expelling a small-scale eruption of ash.

“Can I help you?” the man shouted, sounding puzzled.

He didn't see it. Phillip looked at him; the chill reverberated back and forth from his head to his spine. “Uh, where's Mick Lewis?” He thought he had yelled, but the neighbor barely heard him and then smiled.

“Oh, Mister Lewis? We rent from him. I'm Ron— ”

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Phillip ducked down right away, but he still saw the man say his name. *Mother of God, you could've shot him, you fucking madman.* Shuddering throughout his body, he stumbled off the riser.

It seemed to take an hour to plod back to the patio, ash up to his shins. Phillip shuffled to the door, but it slid open like bank vault steel. He fell into the den and collapsed on the floor, squinting at the carpet. *Useless green crap. Stand up—too cold. Damn, crawl then.* On his three good limbs he dragged himself up to the TV room and crept across the kitchen, peanuts fracturing under his knees.

Ali showed up, arched his spine at first and then sat back on his haunches. His curious blue and gold eyes watched Phillip crawl closer and sit up, legs spraddled on the floor, back against the wall. Ali walked right onto his human's lap and settled there, purring loudly.

"Hey, boy." Distracted from the pulsing cold, he scratched Ali's ears, and the cat turned to rub the plaster of Paris cast. The chill subsided a little more as Phillip petted the old feline's white fur.

That guy didn't see the gun; nobody even knows what I did. You do, Phillip, you completely lost it. And you tried to hit that damn telephone pole. He cradled the cat back to him and looked over at the peanut mess on the kitchen floor. *Frigging chillbrains, do your worst; I think I'm on to you.* Phillip stroked Ali in the hall until they were both asleep.

He dealt with the chill at dawn the next morning and again at about eleven thirty, but he was up and dressed in his work clothes before one o'clock. It was Saturday so Freddy was off; Phillip called him right away and he answered.

"I'm calling to apologize, Freddy. If I talk to you like that again, just tell me to shove it."

"Nah, you were in bad shape; I felt bad just leavin' you. You sound pretty good now; you doin' all right, professor?"

Long way to go. "I'm doing okay."

"That's good to hear. Say, I've got somethin' to tell ya'. Last week I

talked to Myrna's ol' pal at the County about that Ranch project, asked her to keep an eye on it for me. She called today and said they're selling out to a local who plans to scale it way back and re-open Hop Wing's."

"Really? Does she know why?"

"She thinks they bit off more than they could chew."

Farm house. "It's a done deal, then?"

"Close enough that I'm ready to check out Blue Valley some more."

Adios, Mister Lopes. "Good for you, Freddy."

"I thought maybe you might go up there with me this week."

"Definitely." *You'll be with Bill.* "Uh, except I'll probably have a couple appointments back downtown again."

"With the new guy? I thought things didn't go—"

"I didn't give him a chance. Maybe he can help me."

"Now that's real good, professor; we'll just schedule our trip around it." They chatted a few minutes and Phillip said he'd give him the appointment times on Monday. After the call, he made peanut butter and jelly toast and turned on the radio. While he ate, Phillip heard a forecast for higher temperatures so he prepared some ice water to take outside.

He left the water jug, a tube of sun tan lotion and his transistor radio by the patio door and started working on the ash behind the house. After rolling a couple of loads to the street, Phillip came back to the patio for a drink and to remove his hat and tee shirt. He spread lotion on his face and upper body and listened to the Eagles on the radio fretting about "wasted time." He heard a car door slam somewhere out front then returned to his one-arm pushing until he sensed someone was standing behind him.

He pulled the snow shovel back and started to turn around. Phillip's jeans, grey with ash up to the pockets, sagged from his hips; vertebrae showed through his bare chest, and his once-sinewy arms were thin and rubbery. He hadn't showered since before the appointment so his dark-blond hair and beard were unkempt and gritty.

"Nobody answered the doorbell, so I came through the garage,"

Lupe said, standing there in her riding clothes—boots, jeans and a short-sleeve madras shirt. Errant strands of long black hair from her ponytail flowed over one shoulder. Lupe's eyes, always huge to Phillip, widened even more as she approached and took in his appearance from a few feet away.

"My God. Hi, Lupe," he said, but she just stared, her mouth slightly open. Her vacant expression made Phillip look down at himself; it dawned on him he could pass for a survivor of a bombed-out hospital. "Uh; pretty dirty stuff." He sounded meek. "You look great. How long have you been back?" He leaned on his snow shovel.

"A few days; I've been trying to call." She moved closer and Phillip saw a couple tears course over her cheeks.

Jesus. "Lupe?"

She dried her face with the back of her hand. "What happened to you, Phil?"

"Totaled my truck; it's just a bump and a broken arm."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Lupe looked down at his gaunt glistening torso. "You don't look well at all."

"Yeah, I've been to a doctor; I'll be fine." *I hope.*

Lupe sniffled and said, "Give me that damn shovel."

A crease of a smile crossed his face. "Geez, nice language." He chuckled, handed it over and she dug out a full scoop of ash.

"Well, where do we put it?" she asked, her mien still somber as she held up the shovel.

"In my cart." He pulled over his homemade contraption.

"Fine." Lupe heaved the load up and into the box; a grey cloud mushroomed right back out and powdered her clean hair.

Phillip grinned at her. "Uh, you have to drop it in there a little easier."

Lupe waved at the soot floating around her face. "I see that," she said, finally with a smile. "C'mon, Phil, let's get all of it."

They cleared away ash and talked quietly until early dusk closed in again.



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Book II in The American Teachers Series

MARÍA JUANA'S

GIFT



A NOVEL BY
T. LLOYD WINETSKY

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One dollar from each sale of this book reported to the author will be donated to *La Casa Hogar*, a non-profit advocacy and educational agency for farmworker families in Yakima, Washington.

~

María Juana's GIFT

BOOK 2 OF THE AMERICAN TEACHERS SERIES

T. Lloyd Winetsky

Third Edition

P

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Although there are some real places and historical events referred to in this novel, the towns of La Cholla and Sofia are inventions. The characters in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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For Anna W., and to the person she would have become.

PART I



*Anne L., Jake Dylan and
Jake Dylan Friend, 15 Months
("Constance," the Gower Street Theater, 1951)*

1

The old woman was less than five feet tall and not even a nurse's aide, but it was obvious to Jake that she knew what she was doing. One moment he would see María carrying out heavy bags of trash, and minutes later he observed her holding the baby with an authority and tenderness that gave him some hope.

He watched her now, but the pink blanket in her arms didn't move—no wiggling, no crying, and María had stopped acting as if the baby were responsive. Jake and his student who lived with them, Ben, had just visited Tina for a few minutes in her room at the end of the ward. Her reticence led Ben to excuse himself to wait in the truck.

Jake knocked lightly on the nursery window so he could talk to María, who was returning the baby to the incubator for more oxygen. She met him at the glass door, leaning on it hard because of pressure from the air conditioning; Jake pulled it open for her.

María's pale-brown face was drawn and grave. “*¿Señor Fren, el doctor?*”

Frowning, Jake told her he hadn't found him.

“*Señor, la niña, she is worse. She breathes faster,*” she said in Spanish, pointing up at the speaker near the ceiling. “*I heard there was an emergency; the doctor came.*”

“What? *¿Cuándo, señora?*”

“*Maybe a half hour.*”

“I'll be damned,” Jake mumbled to himself, already hurrying away from the nursery into the hall toward the small emergency area. He passed the closed administrator's office and saw the door to the doctors' lounge was ajar. Jake stopped, opened it and called, “Hello?” A dark suit coat and blue tie were draped over the top of a leather recliner; he assumed the clothes were Serna's. Jake left and turned a corner, but he had to stop to keep from colliding with a custodian who was dry-mopping.

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"See the doctor go by here?" Jake asked.

The heavy man, a bit startled by this unexpected redhead in a beard, baseball cap and Bermudas, finally said, "*El doctor*, he go."

"*Gracias, señor.*" Jake hopped over the wide broom and ran to the bench by the back door where many times in the last day he waited futilely, trying to catch the doctor when he left.

Jake went right out into a blast of dry, hundred-degree air to the nearly empty staff parking area. He ran around the corner of the hospital and saw the vintage white Corvette convertible easily take the steep hill, a passenger in the seat next to Doctor Serna.

"Damn it!" Jake shouted, not far from the grey stone face of Mary holding baby Jesus. He ran for the visitors' parking lot and could already see Ben, waiting in the front seat of Jake's old truck.

Doctor Serna and his cousin, the mayor, had no idea someone was pursuing them; the doctor's high-powered engine easily conquered another incline while several blocks back Jake's forty-horse motor strained, balking like a mule.

The Corvette disappeared from Jake's sight; he yanked his gearshift all the way down to second. "Crap, Loretta," he grumbled to the dual-cab Volkswagen he had been refurbishing for years. *Swear to God, you're sold if the damn doctor gets away.*

"¿Maestro?" the teen said, a quiver in his voice.

"It's okay, Ben, I just need to talk to the jerk." *And take him back.*

The pickup slugged onward past some carbon-copy three-bedroom ramblers up to the summit where the afternoon sun struck Jake in the eyes. He reached for the visor, forgetting he had yet to repair it, and instead pulled down the brim of his Chicago Cubs cap. Ben blocked the glare with his arm.

Three blocks ahead at a stop sign, he could see the doctor's Panama hat and the mayor's bald head. To Jake, they looked like tourists at the border, basking in the sun as if it were provided by the gods just for them. He hoped they would stop at the doctor's office, but Serna drove by well above the speed limit.

He's going home, Jake thought, but the Corvette didn't turn into La Cholla Gardens, where the doctor lived; he was heading to town. "Hold on!" he called out to Ben.

His student's dark skin blanched a shade as Jake ran the stop sign. Ben ducked, slouching his gaunt frame below the windowsill. On the down slope, Jake accelerated almost to fifty, the trees and houses blurring by.

"Maestro, you leave me here?"

"What?" *He saw someone back there.* "Okay—this next hill, when I have to slow down."

"*Está bien.*"

The truck hit the incline and started to labor; Jake released the gas pedal, stopping their forward motion. He yanked the hand brake to keep from rolling back, and saw the passenger door was already open. Ben jumped out, waved, and ran down an alley; Jake struggled on up the hill in first gear.

At the next summit, he saw his prey had lengthened the lead to about a half-mile, but Jake was less than a hundred yards behind by the time he sped down to level ground near the fruit warehouse at the outskirts of La Cholla. Doctor Serna parked behind a ceremonial black and white '51 Ford squad car at the head of a line of disparate vehicles.

The friggin' parade. Two Cadillacs idled behind the Corvette, then a fire engine, six antique autos full of war veterans, a farm tractor pulling a hay wagon swarming with Brownie scouts, and four teams of Little Leaguers in station wagons. Eight horses followed, mounted by glittering Mexican *charros* in wide sombreros, then came a hobo clown with a shovel cart, and a tiny red Nash Metropolitan stuffed with three more clowns—one red, one white, and one blue. Every child held a patriotic helium balloon, and some of the adults had dressed up as sons or daughters of the Revolution.

The high school band was near the end, thirty strong, in stifling, clashing black-and-orange uniforms. The teens stood in the shade by a semi's trailer, sullenly unpacking instruments in front of a green tractor that pulled the town float. Sitting up there on star-spangled stairs beneath a white umbrella, the stout 1976 Miss La Cholla primed her puffy black coiffure, gazing into a pocket mirror. The town's tall yellow street sweeper, draped in flag bunting, was the last in line. Its driver, impatient for the parade to begin, was making the square vehicle spin slowly in place like a robot.

There were no curbs this far from downtown, so Jake just pulled off the road by some other cars near the fruit warehouse, not far from Miss La Cholla. He got out of his truck, then ran in starts and stops toward the front of the queue, not noticing a police car slowly following him a half-block behind.

As Jake dodged around participants and gawkers, he recalled that the parade would cross the border and loop through old La Cholla. *No wonder nobody's marching; they don't want to get stuck in Mexico.*

He passed the clowns, who were opening boxes of goodies to throw to the kids—baseball card packs on this side, then athletic socks and hard candy below the border. Jake saw some citizens fooling around with bunting and a sign for the doctor's car: GRAND MARSHALL—MAYOR "RICO" RANGEL. *He can just find another damn driver.*



Sixteen months before the parade in La Cholla, Jake gazed out at a sign in San Diego—OLD TOWN BAKERY AND PANADERIA. He was thinking that some warm *pan dulce* with margarine melted on top sounded good. Fog and the evening rush hour had extended their trip to nearly three hours.

Armando drove two more blocks, circled another, and turned the school district sedan into a parking lot. Except for snoring from the two veteran female teachers in the back, the last fifteen minutes of the drive were quiet; Jake and Armando had run out of things to talk about.

The uneven black letters on the bright sign outside the hotel read, **WELCOME miG/Biling Ed/eSl**, adding to Jake's certainty that his third dreary state conference wouldn't affect anything important in his life.

"Why the frown, Skip?" *Skip* was a recent addition to Armando's exuberant vocabulary, but Jake didn't mind. The fledgling teacher was doing well in their alternative classroom for secondary migrant students, although the previous summer Jake had to convince the principal to hire Armando.

"Not frowning," Jake said, intentionally loud enough to wake the women. Armando parked; they all got out and entered the lobby with light baggage. The hotel had already begun to decorate for the Bicentennial—nothing elaborate yet, just a tall poster of a smirking George Washington and some strings of tiny U.S. flags around the door of the small gift shop.

While Armando and the two rumpled women checked out the tourist junk, Jake handled the purchase order. He made sure their room was far away from "the two ol' bags," as Armando referred to them. The four teachers then registered at the conference table, all but Jake obediently pinning on a two by four-inch rainbow-bordered name badge.

At the third floor, the women glared at Armando before leaving the elevator; the young teacher shrugged and punched the "7" button. Predictably, he and Jake looked up at the indicator as they passed the fourth floor.

Armando Tapia had chestnut-colored skin and dense, raven hair that matched his brows, moustache and long sideburns. Unlike his mentor six feet away, Armando's regular smile gave the impression he was content even when he wasn't. He and Jake had one physical similarity, they were both two inches or so shy of six feet tall.

Jake, a "fat kid" through puberty, developed in his early twenties a preference for walking and biking whenever he could, but the benefits of his exercise sometimes lost out to a daily "beer or two." Now almost twenty-six, his waist had a two-inch fold of adipose; he outweighed lean Armando by about thirty pounds.

A shade darker than a classic redhead, Jake was fair but didn't look

blushed, and his constellations of freckles faded over the years. His slowly receding hair and a sporadically trimmed full beard had darkened from rufous red almost to brown. Jake's most obvious feature, thick auburn eyebrows, furrowed, arched or flattened with any serious thought that crossed his mind.

Both men waited for the elevator in garb typical of what they wore in class—Armando in pressed half-belled blue jeans, black loafers and a brightly printed shirt; Jake in coarse suede shoes, dark-brown jeans and a short-sleeve light-blue dress shirt, never a tie.

The seventh-floor bell “dinged” and Jake turned to Armando, who carried one worn cardboard valise; his black guitar case stood next to him on the elevator floor.

“Far enough away, are we?” Jake asked, grinning.

“Yeah, Skip, thanks. Those two would cramp my style for sure. We’re not eating dinner with them, right?”

“We’re on our own,” he said as the door opened.

Armando twitched his rakish moustache and broadened his smile as he lifted the luggage. “The room’s still mine for tomorrow night; you’re at your brother’s, right?”

Jake hefted his grey canvas bag as they exited, searching for numbers. “My cousin’s.” He turned a corner. “You’re *that* sure you’re going to score?”

“Can’t miss *con mi guitarra*.” He raised the black case and “yipped” as if he were singing a *ranchera*.

“Geez, don’t get us kicked out the first night.”

Armando put a forefinger over his lips. “Got it, Skip, play it cool.”

They walked ahead, reading door numbers. “Where did you come up with *Skip*?” Jake asked.

“That’s what we called our coach. You’re the Skip of our little team, man.”

“Great.” They turned down a hall. “So, you’ll be trying to date a teacher?”

“You nuts? If they’re not old like those two,” he pointed down, “they act like ’em. I’ll be checking out teacher’s aides. What about you?”

“The women here are too young, too married, or still into Elvis.”

“You gotta be lookin’ for something.”

“Yeah, I found it.” Jake pointed at room 725; Armando already had his key out; he opened the door and rushed in. All the lights were on by the time Jake plopped his bag on the first of two queen beds.

Armando drew back the white curtains. “This is perfect, Skip; check out the view.”

Jake looked out at downtown San Diego. The fog had lifted to overcast; a

flashing airliner seemed to be making a suicidal descent right between glimmering office buildings.

"Damn, how can they do that?" Armando said, not expecting an answer. The room had the typical small coffee pot, plastic ice bucket, and sterile wrapped glasses. On the wall above the dresser, a metal-framed print portrayed a generic sailboat on the ocean that was actually several miles from the hotel.

Jake smiled. "First time this high, Mister Tapia?"

"Yup, this beats those dumps on Highway 99. Let's see how the TV works." Armando lifted a boxy remote control attached to the nightstand.

The news came on, the announcer blaring, ". . . Revere's kitchen table in 1775—your Bicentennial Minute for Wednesday, February twenty-sixth, nineteen seventy-five."

"I can't wait to learn the name of Paul Revere's horse," Jake said.

"Yeah, let's eat. I'm starved." Armando muted the sound and checked some other channels.

"Do you want to go out or eat downstairs?"

"Downstairs—easy pickin's." He turned off the TV.

Jake looked at him askance but didn't care enough to ask what he meant. After they washed up, Armando put on a white Filipino shirt; Jake didn't change. About ten minutes later, they entered a half-occupied restaurant decorated with fishing nets, blue glass floats, swords and seahorses. They stood by a Neptune dummy that held a sign in the shape of a treasure chest: PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED.

"Where's your name tag, Skip?"

"In the room."

"It's okay, I've got mine." He patted his badge.

"So?" Jake replied just before a young peroxide-blonde hostess in a jaunty sailor cap walked up to them.

"Two?" she asked Armando.

"We're meeting some friends. If we don't find them," his smile widened, "maybe you could find us a table."

She literally flapped her artificial black lashes. "Anything I can do to help, sir."

They walked into the seating area; Armando half-winked back to her.

"Well, I think you already scored," Jake murmured.

"Not really my type, but who knows?"

"I thought you didn't want to eat with those two."

"You're kidding, right?" Armando scanned the diners as they walked.

“We’ll eat alone before we do that.”

“Then who are you looking for?”

“We just passed a good possibility. Back, Skip.”

Jake turned and saw two women, not ten feet away, slightly slouched and reading their menus at a table set for five. They were both at least Armando’s age; one had medium-length curly brunet hair and strikingly dark oval eyes. To Jake, her attractiveness was compromised by ponderous silver earrings, a matching gaudy necklace, and the rank cigarette smoke she kept waving from her bronze face.

Armando started toward them; Jake lagged behind, thinking the second woman was unremarkable. She wasn’t homely or even plain, but her pale, serious, rounded features had no help at all from Revlon, and unlike her friend, she wore no jewelry. He thought she had average looks and was twenty-five, at most. *God, but look at that hair.* It was long and honey-blonde, natural, he decided, cascading by her slender neck and over her shoulders like clear water, even in the dimmed light.

She could pass for Amish—great. Following Armando up to their table, Jake glanced at the rainbow badge on the blonde’s buttoned-up white cardigan: ~~CHRISTINA~~ LINN, VISALIA, BILING ED. CERT., the first five letters struck through with black marker.

“Man, you guys are from Visalia? I’m from Fresno!” Armando blurted, slapping his conference badge. Christina Linn’s face was blank, but Jake noticed her eyes. They looked soft to him, and root beer brown; he liked the contrast with her resplendent hair. Jake couldn’t tell if she was bashful or angry, but he thought she did deserve to be pissed off by the interruption.

“Fresno, no kidding?” the other woman said, as if it really were a coincidence. She smiled fetchingly; her breasts distended the badge on her white blouse: ORALIA MEDINA—VISALIA—TEACHING ASSISTANT. Oralia doused her smoke and presented long fingers and crimson nails to Armando for a delicate handshake. “I’m Orie; this is Tina. You’re a teacher?” she added, clearly impressed by his status.

“*Armando Tapia, a sus órdenes.*” He nodded to them, then away. “This is Jake; we team-teach in Lemon Branch. Would you ladies care for some dinner company?”

Orie grinned toward Tina, who raised her fair brows ambivalently. Jake stood there looking sheepish and wishing they had gone out for beers and Mexican food.

“Sit down; we’re about to order,” Orie said, snickering. “Tell us where Lemon Branch is.” Armando sat on her other side, leaving Jake the chair between the two women.

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“Lemon Branch, Orange County,” Armando beamed, “just a hop from the Magic Kingdom.” He bragged a minute about their program and then asked, “So you guys teach ESL?” Tina looked to Orie as the hostess arrived with more menus, giving Armando a surly glance.

“And some other things,” Orie answered, still smiling.

The next hour was small talk over large margaritas. The conversation covered the dinner fare, Disneyland, the San Joaquin Valley and Tijuana, mostly two-way banter between Orie and Mando, who had confessed the nickname. As they ate, Tina mostly listened, Jake commented briefly and chuckled; Orie and Armando got louder by the time everyone had dessert. Jake was impressed that Tina understood when they switched to Spanish a few times. All but Tina started on a second margarita while Armando finished telling an energetic joke about seven retarded dwarves, all named Dopey, who couldn't figure out what to do with a willing Snow White.

Tina and Jake sat straight faced.

Orie forced a smile. “Sorry, baby, but that's more cruel than funny.”

Armando turned from her to Jake, who looked back at him with a laugh and said, “Don't look at me, maestro, she's right.”

Armando slurred a little. “Yeah, guess so.”

“Look, Mando,” Orie said, “I didn't tell you we work with disabled kids—Bilingual Special Ed.”

“Hey, I'm all for *that*,” Armando said eagerly, “except when they dump kids in there just because they don't know English. Right, Skip?”

“Of course.” Jake made a half smile.

Orie looked at Tina, and then spoke for them again, this time proudly. “Tina doesn't let that happen in our class. The kids need to have some learning problem besides English.”

“Yeah, that's what I'm saying.” Armando was pleased he had everyone in agreement. “Hey, my stupid joke got us talkin' school—two whole days for that. Let's order a drink; get into music or movies or something.” He had no takers for another round but still looked for the waitress.

“Okay,” Orie said, “let's see, I just saw a John Wayne movie, *Micky-D*, something like that. Wasn't very good, cops and robbers, but I do love his cowboy movies.”

Armando laughed at Jake. “Another vote for the Duke.”

Jake shook his head. “You heard the lady, he's not even versatile enough to play a cop.”

“Ladies,” Armando said, pointing his thumb, “right here's the only guy in the U.S.A. who doesn't like John Wayne movies.”

“You don’t like his politics, Jake?” Orié asked.

“No, I don’t care about his opinions.”

Armando smirked. “Now you gotta explain, man.”

Her pretty eyes wide open, Orié waited for the explanation while Tina slanted her brow, looking puzzled.

“Okay, short and sweet. My dad was an actor—after work, weekends; I grew up around legit actors who loved the stage. You’d think people in L.A. would get used to movie stars, but they treat them like gods. To me, they’re nothing unless they can act and don’t sell out—Gregory Peck, Katharine Hepburn, Brando; damn few others. John Wayne just plays himself; he’s a star, not an actor.” Embarrassed that he got so carried away, Jake was flushed.

Tina cleared her throat, creasing her forehead. “Uh, sorry, I don’t think I’ve heard of him.”

They all stared at her for a few seconds; Jake’s jaw felt unhinged.

“John Wayne?” Armando said, starting to snigger. “You *are* kidding, right, Tina?”

“No,” she answered quietly.

Orié kept herself from laughing. “Tina, you’ve been here six months now; you must’ve heard of him back in college, or after that.”

“No, I went from Kentucky right back to Africa.”

Trying not to stare rudely, Jake said, “Africa?” *And no John Wayne?*

“Yes.” Tina looked at him with a shrug and a very slight grin, transforming her face for a moment.

Jake saw her brief and comely smile. *What was her family doing over there? Diplomats? Doctors? How does she know Spanish?*

Armando, still chortling, was telling Tina how John Wayne was number one at the box office.

Orié jumped in. “Tina, get this, he’s been married,” she showed three fingers, “*tres veces, a tres hispanas.*”

Tina returned a diffident half smile, again enchanting Jake, who watched her furtively while they filled Tina in on John Wayne’s movies and his real name.

“Enough with the Duke,” Armando finally said to Tina, still amused by her cultural naiveté. “I want to ask you about Jake’s favorite singer, and you gotta tell us the truth.”

“All right,” she said, looking down self-consciously.

“It’s Elvis Presley.” Armando’s tone was gleeful. “You can’t tell me you never heard of *him.*”

She barely closed her eyes, like a long blink, showing a bit of pique. “Yes,

I know about Elvis.” Tina looked at Jake apologetically. “I don’t like his music very much.”

“Bingo!” Armando shouted, then laughed. “Tina, before he starts telling you how much Elvis sucks, have you ever heard of—?”

“That’s enough, Mando,” Orié broke in, eyes daggered. Her interruption barely precluded one from Jake, who looked at Orié appreciatively.

Armando put both arms up helplessly, like in a movie stick-up. “Okay, okay, sorry. Relax, everybody; the night is young.”

Orié yawned. “Not for me it isn’t. We drove half of California and shopped all of Tijuana—afraid I’ve had it.”

Armando stood, his mind working on a way to finish his move on Orié. “Should I order coffee?” He searched for the waitress again.

Orié smiled, shaking her head. “Not before bed, baby.”

Either *bed* or *baby* seemed to put Armando in a frenzy; he sat again, proposing to play her some music.

Jake smiled at Tina, who attempted to ignore Armando’s nearby pleading. Before Orié could end the conversation with Armando, Jake tried to summon his nerve. *What the hell, give it a shot; ask her.*



Fifteen minutes later, Jake and Armando sat at the small table in their room and looked out, this time at a propjet flying even more precariously past the modest skyscrapers of San Diego. Jake had picked up two beers downstairs; they sipped from the cans, watching the view.

“Look at that crap,” Armando said. “I’m never goin’ up there.”

Jake scoffed. “You’ll fly before you’re twenty-five.”

“Feeling pretty smart, aren’t you, Skip?” His question was rhetorical. “Man, I can’t believe it; you score for tomorrow night, and I strike out.”

“Yeah,” Jake replied, needling him, “I think I could’ve had a date with either one of them.”

“You’re getting carried away now, man.” Armando shook his head. “I never would’ve guessed Orié’s three years older than me.”

“Like she wasn’t surprised by *your* age?”

“I shoulda’ faked it. It was goin’ good until then.”

Jake couldn’t hold back a snicker. “Yeah, maybe so.”

“It isn’t funny. I heard that line you used on Tina: *¿Le gusta los mariscos?* That’s horrible, and way too formal. She probably hates seafood, but she bought it anyway. She’s into you, man.”

Jake tried not to smile at that reassuring news. “And how do you know that?”

“Shit, I know. So, you take the room tomorrow night.”

“And scare her off? No, I like her.”

“Jesus, aren’t you the guy who was going to the border to check out *las putas*?”

Jake’s light complexion reddened a shade. “We were just going down there for, uh—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Armando interrupted. “Won’t your date mess up the deal with your cousin?”

“I’ll call, and see him on Friday night. The room is yours.”

“Works for me.” Armando stood up. “I’m gonna brush my teeth, get the ol’ *guitarra*, and head downstairs for the social.”

Jake grinned. “Back on the trail?”

Armando started across the room. “Yup. You coming?”

“Nah, I’m finished for one night.”

“Tina’s cool, Skip; and I know you dig that hippie hair, but you just met her.” Armando laughed, stopping near the bathroom. “You sound like an ol’ married man.”

“Yeah, sure. Just go have fun, Mando,” Jake chided.

“I will; bank on it,” he called back from the sink.

Regardless of the joking around, Jake thought about what Armando said, admitting to himself that he didn’t know Tina at all. *Acting like a smitten adolescent*. He looked out the window at the lights, finishing his beer. *Then again, she seems like one of a kind.*

2

Sweat pouring from his forehead, Jake approached the doctor and mayor in the Corvette; they laughed to each other about something. The mayor had donned a ridiculous white ten-gallon Stetson; his gut jiggled where it hung below his red cowboy shirt. The school band cut loose with a discordant blast of *It's a Grand Old Flag*, the horses jittering from the clamor.

Jake tapped the back of the sleeve of the doctor's red-and-blue-striped white summer shirt. "Doctor Serna!" he shouted over the racket.

The young doctor turned around with a wide smile; the portly mayor was shaking hands with Ben Franklin and simultaneously leering at a busty Betsy Ross. Serna distorted his light-brown face into a squint and removed the Panama hat to block the sun, revealing a full head of neat hair, dark and reflective as plain coffee.

"Oh, uh, Mister Friend," the doctor called out. "Good, you finally got out of that place—happy Fourth."

The band's practice medley was now on *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, so Jake and the doctor had to keep yelling.

"I'm not here for the parade, doctor; you know I've been trying to reach you. I want you to come with me to the hospital." Jake pointed back. "I'm parked just over there."

"What? I don't think so, Mister Friend." His smile vanished only for a moment.

"My daughter, doctor, she—"

"Listen, she's in good hands. Now please leave me to enjoy my Sunday," Serna said, not as loud. He turned away and put on his hat, assuming the matter was finished.

"*You* listen," Jake shouted just as the bandmaster signaled for immediate silence, "our baby's sick!" Those within twenty yards of the Corvette stopped yammering to gawp at Jake and the doctor.

“Jesus, man, shut up.” Serna spoke under his breath through a toothy grin, looking around as if Jake were not there. After a few silent, awkward moments, the parade participants mumbled, and then resumed the loud gabbing.

The doctor spoke to Jake again, still without eye contact. “All right, spit it out; keep your voice down.”

“Fine. Yesterday the nurse told me something wasn’t right with Emma; I’ve been trying to catch you ever since.”

Serna finally looked at him. “That was *you* at my house again? This is getting ridiculous,” he added in a low grumble. “All right, here’s the deal, Mister Friend.”

Teeth clenched, Jake glowered at him. “Okay, tell me.”

“I came back yesterday for morning rounds and checked them both; they were fine, and I know you’ve been told since then that the baby’s levels are normal.”

“Have *you* been told that McNally isolated her, put her on oxygen, and she’s still breathing too fast?”

“I heard about the oxygen,” he said with a trace of a scoff. “My colleague was just taking precautions.”

“He was trying to help. You could’ve come by and checked her when you were there this morning.”

“Mister Friend,” he said, smiling and snarling at once. “I was taken out of mass for an emergency that *wasn’t*. I’ll see your wife and baby on regular rounds first thing tomorrow.”

Jake shook his head. “No, that’s not good enough.”

“What? Who do you think you are?” The doctor caught his rising tone mid-sentence and smiled at a Minuteman walking by. Serna turned, glaring at Jake. “Who said she was worse, that old woman?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“For God’s sake, man, her job is to change diapers and clean up. You couldn’t understand her, anyway.”

“I speak Spanish, Doctor.”

“Doesn’t matter. These people think she’s, uh . . . a cure-a-dera—whatever they call it.”

“*Curandera*. What matters is that María knows the baby’s sick.”

“Ridiculous. The charge nurse would’ve contacted me if there was a real problem.”

“She said you were too busy.”

“Exactly right; she deserves a raise.” He waved to three tardy band members.

"My wife knows something's wrong; she just stares at Emma when they bring her."

"Mister Friend, your baby is big and healthy, and your wife is uh, stoic, like these wet—uh, migrants."

Schmuck. "I know my wife; she *should* have been crying." Jake tried to calm himself. "Look, I'm just asking you to go and take another look at Emma. If we're wrong about this, you'll have my personal apology."

"You know where I'm going? To old La Cholla."

Overhearing his cousin, the mayor stopped glad-handing and swiveled his thick neck. "Is there a problem, Eddie?"

"Nah, Rico, he's just leaving."

Jake opened the door of the Corvette part way. "I am, and I'm still asking you to come with me. The cops can drive him."

"Last time, Mister Friend," Serna said through his teeth again, "I'm not going to the hospital."



Jake prepared for the first day of the convention by cutting up a paper sack to cover the novel he was reading. He woke up Armando, showered, and then got dressed in the same pants with a clean white dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He put on his badge because it also served as the lunch ticket. Jake headed for the elevator with his book and the conference folder.

Downstairs, the educators were assembling for continental breakfast in the hallway outside the cavernous main room that would host the keynote speech. The corridor was wall-to-wall with conventioners jabbering while nibbling from plastic plates held in one hand. Some of them carried their belongings in SAN DIEGO or TIJUANA shopping bags.

Jake figured about three-fourths of them were teachers, mostly women, but he wasn't surprised to see some men who were very much into "Sunny San Diego," wearing Bermuda shorts and florid short-sleeve shirts, although it was again a cool day.

Their mean age, he guessed, was around thirty-five, mostly born during World War II, only a few years his senior. Jake thought many of them belonged to a society whose day had passed; he dismissed their generation as the last one that would grow old with the champagne music of Lawrence Welk. He believed the majority had ignored the sixties and were now chiefly motivated by acquisition or greed. Most egregious of all, he concluded that for way too many of these teachers, students were a low priority.

After seeing one man make a spectacle of himself with an oversized souvenir sombrero, Jake looked for Tina at the breakfast tables. He found Armando; the two of them sat through a self-congratulatory keynote address by a man named Muñoz, a high-level bureaucrat in federal education.

Following the speech, Jake spotted Tina in the hall making coffee; he started over to her. She seemed an inch or two shorter than he recalled from the night before, probably about five-five. She wore sleek dark slacks and a different cardigan, this one was pink and buttoned only at the bottom; he couldn't help but notice that her breasts formed a nice taut line in her white blouse. Tina carried an over-the-shoulder purse larger than a grocery sack, printed in three vertical colors—green, red, and yellow, with a yellow star at the middle of the red band.

She doesn't look Amish today. He walked quickly the rest of the way. "Morning, Tina."

She looked up with an unimposing smile, but to him it was radiant. Tina read his badge.

"Morning, Jake. Your last name is Friend?"

He noticed her faintly penciled brows. "Afraid so."

"Is that an unusual name?"

"Not really; I'll tell you its fascinating story tonight when we have some time."

They quickly firmed up their plans to taxi out for seafood, but Jake worried that she sounded unenthused, even for her. He hoped Armando was right, maybe she just didn't like fish; later he could suggest something else. They arranged to meet again during the second break in a room provided for publishers to display their books.

Jake's first session was a mandatory one on Migrant Health, which turned out to be even more of a waste of time than he expected. His book hidden in his conference folder, Jake started to read, chuckling at the story so loud once that the presenter stared him down.

After the hour droned to a close, Jake walked to the coffee tables, hoping to run into Tina. His next session was flexible; he could choose from anything, even Bilingual Special Ed. Jake perused the schedule and looked around for her at the same time, oblivious of the goofy smile on his face. He poured coffee and cheerily greeted a male server, who told him, "I can see, sir, I don't need to wish *you* a happy day."

Embarrassed, he left for a presentation by Armando's favorite teacher at Fresno State. To Jake, Professor Rivera, a small man with a black Wyatt Earp moustache, passionately stated the obvious: "When our kids walk through that

door, they bring the language and culture they learned at their mother's breast. Our schools often treat it like a deficit, sometimes even for kids who are literate in their own language. The latest name for this is 'English immersion,' an insidious idea that assumes the brain of a second language learner is *tabula rasa*, a blank slate.

"Immersion is actually the drowning of our students' language, and is taught by many Anglos *and* Latinos. The good news is, I'm about to show you how some English teachers honor the home culture, and I don't mean piñatas and Taco Tuesdays. Now, if I've ruffled any feathers, you're still welcome to stay. Those who can't handle my spiel, I'll make it easy and fix my overhead. Have a nice life." He turned away; three Latinos and four Anglos left the packed room. From Jake's perspective, they missed out on what was the most practical workshop in three conventions.

At the break, Jake was waiting to talk to Rivera when he remembered Tina and hustled downstairs. He saw her on the far side of the room, chatting with Orié and some other women near a publisher's table. Wondering what he might learn by watching her for a moment, Jake stopped.

Tina listened intently or courteously but didn't respond even one time while Jake watched. He noticed the women all had some kind of curled or processed hair while Tina's, now in full light, seemed even more lustrous than the night before. He broke his reverie and approached them.

As he came closer, Jake heard Orié say, "Here's Jake, Tina, you can find out about that session."

He stiffened his face, consciously trying to hide his crush on Tina. "What session?" he asked matter-of-factly, but she reacted with one of her reserved smiles, melting Jake's resolve into a display of all his front teeth. Before Tina could speak, some sort of body language passed from Orié to the others, which sent the women on their way, half of them giggling. Tina blushed as she removed the convention folder from her huge woven purse.

Jake was determined to be more upbeat after his rant about John Wayne. "I like your purse," was all he could come up with.

"Thanks. That lady laughed at it, said it was a 'Hate-Azberry bag.' Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, Haight-Ashbury's a neighborhood in Frisco. She meant a hippie bag." Jake scowled. "*Pendeja*," he added under his breath.

"What did you call her?"

"Sorry, my L.A. Spanish."

"C'mon, Jake, I need to know the bad words."

"*Pendejo*—uh, pubic hair. It's used like *jerk*, a tad stronger."

“Oh,” she said in a bland tone. “And, uh, Frisco is San Francisco?”

“Yeah, only in L.A.” Jake smiled. “They don’t appreciate it up north.”

“I see. You must think I’m pretty slow.”

“I do not.” He didn’t disguise very well how much he disagreed. Jake pointed at her purse. “Is that design from an African flag?”

“Yes, Cameroon.” Tina looked into her folder. “This is the session, Jake. I think it’s one of yours.”

Tina moved beside him, pointing at the schedule and accidentally brushing his forearm. The light touch of her soft skin scintillated him like the first time he held hands in junior high; he couldn’t focus on the words.

“Which one again?” he asked, sounding annoyed.

“You okay?” Tina answered, touching the page.

Pathetic, Jake. “Yeah, fine. Uh, the NMAS update? Yes, it’s mandatory for me—two hours, probably the driest session here. You’re going?”

“After reading this, I was hoping they could somehow help me get my student records sooner.”

“What?” Jake chuckled. “Oh, *do* come along; you’ll never have to waste your time on it again.” They walked around scores of educators gabbing at full volume, and then moved down the hall, heading for the staircase to the second floor, where most presentations took place.

Starting up the wide stairs, Jake remembered their earlier chat. “Uh, Tina, do you really like seafood?”

“Yes, but I’ve already had my quota of fancy restaurants.”

“Okay. Maybe we’ll just wait until later and see what sounds good.” She returned another demure smile, all the answer he needed.

They entered the same room Jake was in earlier for Migrant Health, but the partition was moved to accommodate about thirty rows of the hotel’s ubiquitous scarlet red, padded convention chairs—stacked in some rooms up to the low ceilings.

Behind and above the long table at front, there was a ten-foot white plastic banner, professionally produced with an enlarged version of the same colorful logo that graced the convention badges—a family of six light-skinned, grinning Latino farm workers, the parents and two young children in work clothes, proudly holding up green stalks. A male teen stood at one end of the family, a female at the other, each wearing a mortarboard and holding a diploma. Above the logo it read:

NMAS
NATIONAL MIGRANT ARCHIVE SYSTEM
Jacksonville, Florida

Jake led Tina to almost the last row, where they sat and watched a middle-aged black woman in glasses and a red suit pull a screen down over the banner; all you could see then was NATIONAL and SYSTEM. The large room was about a third full, a few stragglers walking in.

"This is the *real* fun part," he said to Tina, who was reading from the ten-page handout. Jake had already skimmed the pages, stuffed them away and was now situating his novel behind the flaps of the convention folder.

In a southern drawl, the presenter asked someone to lower the lights halfway; she turned on her projector and faced the audience. This was the third time Jake had to listen to her. He thought she resembled Shirley Chisholm, the congresswoman who ran for President, but without the smarts.

The lady welcomed them then wasted five minutes saying she only had an hour to cover a lot of material. She pre-scolded everyone and said, ". . . questions are to be saved for the panel in the second hour." Though most of the audience was experienced with migrant forms, she insisted that some changes required a complete review. After she proceeded to remind everyone that a student's last name must be written over "LAST," a few participants began to disappear for feigned potty breaks. Tina turned to him; Jake was even charmed by the slight scowl she made toward the presenter. As the lady from NMAS continued with one inanity after another, Jake opened his book.

"What are you reading?" Tina whispered without looking at him, like a kid cheating on a test.

"*Milagro Beanfield War*," he murmured. "About a guy named Joe Mondragón, and his pinto beans. Hilarious, but it really has—"

"Excuse me, sir," the presenter said. "If you're discussing form Two-B, kindly do it more quietly or wait for the panel." Several severe faces turned back to Jake.

"Oh, sorry, right, I'll do that." He grinned to Tina. She propped the conference folder on her lap and extracted needles and yarn from her purse. Tina shrugged and started crocheting; Jake went back to his book, thinking about her; it took minutes for the words on the page to mean anything.

During the break, he answered a couple questions that Tina had about the forms. After a bathroom visit, they returned to the room five minutes late for the second hour. The NMAS banner was visible again; most of the audience was back from the first hour along with some new people, including a cosmopolitan-looking group of NMAS officials settling in behind the front table, all of them in suits.

A tall man at the podium said he was Manuel Barajas, Director of California NMAS. Jake thought he could pass for a Mormon missionary in his crew

cut, dark suit, black tie and white socks. The man thanked the Shirley Chisholm look-alike; Jake knew they had heard the last from her. Barajas welcomed the panel: two Hispanic men and two women, one Asian and one Anglo. After the first three panelists explained their roles in California, the fourth, a chalky-faced woman whose husky frame strained the seams of her fastidious brown suit, said she was Ida Swanson, the National Director of NMAS from Jacksonville.

Tina took out a spiral notebook, looking surprised that Jake was attentive to the panel.

“Let’s see if anyone asks a real question,” he whispered to her. The director concisely answered three inquiries about the migrant forms; not even pretending that her assistant had adequately explained the same topics in the first hour. Jake shook his head, then occupied himself by doodling and re-tracing a short phrase on his folder.

Two rows away, a tall, bearded man in a tweedy sport coat raised his hand and stood, identifying himself as an administrator from the Imperial Valley. “My question is also for Ms. Swanson,” he said. “NMAS has been up and running now a few years; when do you expect the system will be of any *real* use for teachers who work with migrant students?” Jake saw some of the audience turn and sneer at Imperial Valley as if he had crashed a party. Jake and a couple others lightly applauded in support of the question. Eyes open wide, Tina looked around, gauging the friction in the room as Ida Swanson cleared her throat to answer.

“Thank you for the question,” Ida said over her glasses, folds forming in her chubby neck. “Since you’ve already decided that the system is useless, sir, please tell me what doesn’t work.”

“Nothing works,” he said, “and the fact that you don’t know, speaks volumes.” In response to the man’s criticism, grumbles rippled across the audience.

Ida Swanson smirked, knowing she had the support of most of those present. “Since you offer no specifics, sir, is there anyone here who can explain how *nothing* works with NMAS?” A wave of sniggers passed through the room as the educators looked around for someone foolish enough to disparage the agency that paid part of their salaries. No one spoke up right away, but as Swanson looked like she was about to go on, Jake got to his feet.

“Yes, sir,” she said confidently, assuming Jake would start a new topic. “Your question, please?”

“The same as his; I’ll give you some specifics. My name’s Jake Friend, I teach in Orange County; this is my third year of watching your records fill up

our file cabinets. They arrive a month to six months after the students, if they come at all. The records that do show up are blank, inaccurate or out-of-date—to put it plainly, useless.”

“With all due respect,” Ida countered, “I believe you’re exaggerating, sir. In fact, our main goal this year is to improve outgoing data by holding nationwide in-services to help schools send out information properly.”

Jake was shaking his head. “Yeah, you sent one of our elementary school secretaries to L.A.”

“Yes, she will need to share the information with the other secretaries. As you know, her main job is to get educational information from teachers, combine it with health and other student data, and then send it off to us.”

“No, her *main* job is to run a school, and mine is to teach. If the day comes when migrant teachers in Texas and California can directly exchange useful information, we’ll have something. Until then, you and your bureaucrats have job security.”

“I assure you, we are dedicated to improving NMAS. After all, uh, Mister *Friend*,” she smirked again, “we don’t want *enemies* in the classrooms.”

The jibe at the expense of Jake’s surname brought appreciative chuckles from much of the audience, deflating some of the tension.

“Very funny,” he said, then paused; the group hushed. “You know, Ms. Swanson, laughter is a great thing unless you use it to hide your real problems.” Jake sat down, his arm shaking a little after the adrenaline rush from confronting so many people. As if nothing had happened, a woman stood to ask about NMAS health codes. When Barajas fielded the question, Jake saw Imperial Valley and three others head for the doors.

For the second time in half a day, Tina had been off Jake’s mind. He turned and couldn’t figure out her blank expression. *Maybe the conflict upset her; that’s understandable. What if she disapproves of me hassling them? That’d be too damned bad. See what she does.*

He nudged her arm, showing Tina the retraced doodle he made: SO, IDA, ADIOS. “As usual, this is a waste of time,” he said not very quietly and got to his feet. “I’m going.” *What about you?*

Not hesitating, Tina stood up and stuffed her notebook and conference folder into the large purse. She turned to him resolutely and they left, Jake grinning at her seriousness. As soon as they were in the hall, she raised her eyebrows and quietly said, “Yes, it was a waste, but you were wrong about one thing—that last part wasn’t boring at all.”

3

The mayor hailed an officer who had just exited the driver's side of the old Ford in front of the Corvette. In a tan uniform, sunglasses, but no hat, the trim Latino cop walked up to Jake and put a hand on his shoulder. "How's the new dad, maestro?" he said, and then faced the mayor. "What can I do for you, sir?"

The mayor eyed the officer suspiciously. "Sergeant, this man seems to be bothering the doctor."

Limping up from behind in a formal uniform, a thin, graying policeman with sunburned cheeks overheard the mayor's complaint before the sergeant turned back to Jake. "Uh, Mister Friend, so what's going on here?" the younger cop asked in a more official tone.

"I was asking the doctor to come to the hospital. Our baby's sick, Jesús."

"Sorry to hear that," the sergeant said, his face turning grave. He looked at the mayor. "Sir, Mister Friend here is my neighbor; his wife was my kid's teacher. I'm sure if he says—"

"I'll take over here, sergeant," the frail senior officer interrupted. Jesús backed off just enough to avoid insubordination.

"Captain LeBlanc," the mayor said with a huff, "this man—"

"Yes, sir, I already heard." The captain looked across the car to Jake. "I'll need your license, sir."

"License, what for?"

"A stop sign and speeding, and I have a question about that green truck of yours." He started to hobble around the front of the Corvette.

Shit. Jake felt all his pockets. *Double shit.* "Uh, sorry, officer," he called as Le Blanc approached. "My wallet's in the truck."

The captain shuffled up to him. "Of course."

"Look," Jake pleaded, "I'll bring my wallet and pay the tickets right after the doctor sees our baby. Sergeant Ramos will vouch for me." He turned to Jesús, who nodded to his boss.

"Is this an emergency or not, doc?" the captain asked, looking down into the convertible.

Serna scoffed. "It certainly is not, captain."

"I see." Leblanc raised his white eyebrows. "This is the same guy Corporal Sanchez saw at your house."

Serna grinned confidently. "Yes, I know."

"I left when I was told to," Jake said, grumbling.

"Whitey," Serna said with a put-on magnanimous smile, "Mister Friend here got anxious about his baby; happens all the time. He just needs to leave; you can forget about the business at my house."

"Whatever you say." Leblanc turned to Jake. "You still get the traffic tickets. By the way, who was that Mexican kid in your truck?"

Damn. "Just one of my students."

Leblanc sneered doubtfully. "Bring your registration and driver's license over to me, sir." He pointed back at his light blue squad car, idling near the fire engine.

"Fine." Jake jogged down the line and around some Brownies who were complaining about the dirty hay wagon. He slipped on the gravel, slamming a knee into the Nash Metropolitan's headlight as the blue clown started the motor, frowning at Jake through his painted-on happy face.

He limped on, hurrying by the last tractor, its engine also starting up. The pain in his leg subsided, and Jake ran faster past the community float before scrambling into the front of his truck, sweat stinging him in one eye. The wallet wasn't there; Jake searched the glove compartment and all the crevices, scratching his arm when he groped into the springs under the seat. "Piss up a rope!" he yelled loud enough that Miss La Cholla heard the oath and wrinkled her bulbous nose. Jake got out, slamming the back door as the band struck up some George M. Cohan, and the parade started to move.

Enough screwing around, find the old doctor. He got behind the wheel, started the engine and inched away from all the hubbub in first gear. Drying his perspiring face with the cleaner side of a filthy oil rag, Jake came to the end of the block and saw police lights flashing far behind. He turned left, "gunned" his weak motor, and made for the top of the hill.

He'll catch you—won't help the baby if you're arrested. Come up with something, quick. Let's see, uh, captain—crap, you better stop. In his rearview mirror, Jake saw the blue squad car start up the hill, but the flashers went off as it approached. Jake took a left at a side street and pulled over just beyond the first small frame house. The La Cholla P.D. squad car made the turn and

parked about twenty feet behind him in direct sunlight. Because of the glare, Jake couldn't even see the captain, who stayed in the car.

Doing his cop stuff on the radio; you have to wait. Damn, how the hell did it come to all this?



Jake and Tina came to the stairs and started down.

"We have some time before lunch, Tina; I have at least two questions I'd like to get off my chest."

"I have one, too. What's with *So, Ida, Adios*?"

"It's a palindrome, the same both ways."

"S-O-I-D-A-A . . ." She stopped spelling aloud. "Hm, right. We did them in freshman English, like *radar*."

"Or Hannah, my sister's name; she's really into them. Last year at NMAS, some other bored guy showed me *So, Ida, Adios*—it was the highlight of the morning."

"I can see how it was," she said, stepping off the last stair with him. "Okay, Jake, your two questions. The first one's Africa, right?"

He grinned at her as they started across the busy lobby. "I take it you get that one a lot?"

"Yes, but I can't guess your other one."

"Spanish, how you learned it over there." Jake figured that Tina wouldn't talk much until they had some privacy. They entered the main room; only a few people waited for lunch while a squad of mostly Latino workers in kitchen whites arranged hundreds of place settings on crimson tablecloths. Tina and Jake sat at a table for ten; he looked around the room, recalling that he chatted in Spanish with the crews from the previous conferences. Jake wondered how many of the same workers were still there.

"The people we serve, serving us," Tina said.

He turned to her. "Yeah, that's right. Are you trying to get me talking?" He wagged his finger a little bit. "Uh-uh, Christina, I'm waiting for *you* to begin."

"I actually don't use Christina much."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"My mother wanted Jesus in my name one way or the other. Now just she and the government insist on it."

"Keep Christ in Christina."

"Right. My big brother, Jimmy, told me that my dad called me Chrissy when I was a baby; she'd have none of it. Around Mom, my brother is James, like the disciple."

"That sounds, uh, pretty hard line."

"Yes, that's my mom." She explained that her mother came from farm country north of San Francisco; her father, who had passed away, was from southwest Oregon. Tina said that all her ancestors were from northern Europe. She sighed. "My mom and dad were missionaries."

Man, Amish wasn't far off. Trying not to show any dismay over her religious background, Jake said, "So now I know why you were in Africa; what about *where* you were, and the Spanish?"

Tina told him that she and her brother grew up with a fondness for the forests and fields near their town in southern Cameroon. They learned a Bantu dialect from the other children and sometimes got in trouble with her mother after playing for hours with the kids on the cassava, cacao and yam farms. Her father, under the guise of keeping them out of mischief, would often make a case for bringing Christina and James along to the outlying villages to help with his community development projects.

At each transition in her narrative, Tina paused, her body language communicating, *Is that enough?* Jake would just smile and say, "Go on," or prompt her with a question. As she continued, Jake felt privileged to listen because he was sure it was unusual for Tina to talk about herself. He also wasn't surprised by her succinct but thoughtful explanations; Jake had already attributed the old saying, *still waters run deep*, to Tina Linn.

She told him that she attended an international high school in Yaounde, the Cameroon capital, and was entranced by an island, Fernando Po, twenty-five miles off the coast. Po was part of Equatorial Guinea, the tiny country below Cameroon, which was called Spanish Guinea before gaining independence from Spain in 1968.

"There's a Spanish-speaking country in Africa?" Jake asked, a bit ashamed that this was news to him. She spoke fondly of the Equatogineans living in Malabo, a town of less than fifty thousand on Fernando Po. Malabo was the nation's capital, though mainland Equatorial Guinea was ten times larger than the small island.

"You won't believe this." Tina put her hand to her mouth as if to share something risqué. "The island is named after a Portuguese explorer, *Fernao do Poo*."

"Poo? You're kidding."

"I told you." Tina chuckled slightly. "The Spanish changed it to *Fernando Po*, but the government is talking about changing it again." She saw Jake raise a brow. "No," she quickly added, "not back to *Poo*."

Tina had actually grinned a little; he counted it as her third or fourth smile

of the morning. Jake was charmed again, wishing she'd talk all day. "Go on, you're not even out of high school yet."

She resumed the scanty, low-key autobiography and told him that during vacations she visited the beaches near Malabo with some other girls. Tina became involved with the people there and was fascinated by their languages, which included Spanish, a pidgin English, French, and some Bantu dialects. She switched from French to Spanish in school, and during summer volunteered to teach English classes in Malabo for the Catholic Church. Then, at her small college in the hills of Kentucky, she majored in Special Ed. and minored in Spanish. Despite protests from her Protestant mother, Tina went back to Malabo to teach English with the Catholics.

"So, what brought you here?" Jake asked as a few more hungry conventioners filed in. Tina said she had only been teaching a year in Malabo when the nation's ruler declared himself President-for-Life, beginning a brutal dictatorship. Not long after that, her father, diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer, came back with Mrs. Linn to the university hospital in Eugene, Oregon. Tina returned to help out; he died soon afterwards. After helping her mother move back to northern California, Tina applied in Visalia, the closest job opening in Bilingual Special Ed.

Jake stumbled through condolences for her father's death and began a convoluted inquiry about Tina's uneven awareness of U.S. culture. He stopped when the hall became raucous with herds of nattering educators, many of them playing a game of *Where should we sit?*

Tina tried to speak over the din. "Your two questions are up." Her mouth formed a slit of a smile. "When do I hear your story?"

He didn't try to answer as the workers pulled back some dividers to expose more tables, already set. They opened a nearby curtain to reveal two long tables on a platform, the place for the bigshots to eat. The room transformed so quickly that Jake and Tina sat there, wide-eyed for several moments, taking it all in.

A large group of women from Bakersfield descended on the couple to claim the eight open seats. A teacher in matronly glasses turned to a cluster of her cronies. "I see some chairs over there, Rhonda," she called, ignoring Tina and Jake as she and the others sat down.

"We're right near the front," Jake said. "Shall we make these ladies happy and join the wallflowers?"

"Yes, let's." Tina stood up. "Your story tonight," she murmured to him as they walked away.

Jake heard the Bakersfield teacher shout, "Rhonda, there's two seats over here now!"

While they ate, Tina and Jake listened to a man explain how he had his students using cameras for language arts. Three women at the table criticized the concept as “too wild.” Tina whispered to Jake that they were ganging up on the teacher and his good ideas. When she didn’t speak up, Jake said to the man, “Well, both of us like your approach,” and then turned to Tina, who quietly defended the camera enthusiast by explaining a similar method she used.

One skeptic stopped the discussion by declaring lunch was over, but Tina and Jake chatted with the man for a few more minutes. They thanked him and walked out to the bustling hallway, stopping between the elevator doors and the stairs, where it wasn’t so noisy.

“Tina, are you upset with me for goading you into coming to that guy’s rescue?”

“No, I’m glad you did. They were so narrow-minded.”

“I was impressed by your argument. Where did you come up with using a portable TV camera?”

“One of my profs recorded our teaching; I learned how to use the equipment. I use it with my kids a couple times a month.” She raised her brows. “Thanks to that teacher, now I have some more ideas.”

“Your classroom must be a trip, Ms. Linn,” he said, smiling. “Very liberated of you.”

She scoffed. “Right, that’s me—Ms. liberated.”

“You are; you try new ideas.” He paused. “Tina, it was really hard for you to speak up like that, wasn’t it?”

Tina sighed. “You can’t imagine.” She turned away. “Jake, I need to go upstairs before the next session.”

As they headed for the elevator doors, he decided not to pursue the shyness question. “What do you have this afternoon, Tina?”

“Two special eds. You?”

“Another NMAS, if you can believe it, and one open.”

Tina looked at him, almost glum. “Uh, in that kind of situation,” she glanced back to where they ate, “I get extremely nervous. It’s different with my students—we’re sort of on the same level.”

“Wait a sec, I don’t buy that last part,” he said, unintentionally brusque, just as the elevator chimed.

“That’s me, Jake.”

It wasn’t clear to him if she was referring to herself or the elevator. “Sorry, Tina, I didn’t mean to be pushy.”

“You weren’t. See you at six.” She entered with three others, turned around and lowered her chin.

To Jake, she seemed downcast. *Your fault, klutz.* The door closed; he opened his folder, but the page seemed blank for several seconds.

Jake spotted Rivera's name and decided he couldn't stomach another dose of NMAS, so he went down the hall to a panel discussion on "National Goals." Large enough for a hundred people, the room was only a third occupied, not half the number of participants who crammed into Rivera's earlier session. There were eight on the panel, six administrators and two teachers—Professor Rivera and a male P.E. specialist from San Diego named Acevedo.

While the officials commented on the first educational goal, Jake scolded himself for how he spoke to Tina, worrying he might have blown his chances with her.

Up front, they asked the P.E. teacher to respond to the goal. He smiled and said, "Yes, I think it's very good; after all, the kids are our future." Rivera had his turn and offered four clear and sensible reasons why the goal was nonsense. The panel, looking as if they had soiled their drawers, mostly ignored the professor after that.

Disgusted after a half hour, Jake left for the elevator. He got his jacket from the room, went out and walked around the city, releasing some of his hostility for the convention. He stopped at a tavern for a couple of beers and started anguishing about Tina, wondering if Armando was actually right about her being "into" him. Jake returned to the room, rested a while and showered.

Not wanting to arrive too early and too dressed up for their date, he walked out of the elevator at five fifty-five wearing a fresh long-sleeve yellow shirt, his Cubs cap, an unlined navy blue windbreaker, and the same jeans and sturdy shoes.

They had planned to meet at the gift shop; he ambled over there and noticed some pastel plastic eggs with hotel logos, interspersed now between the tiny U.S. flags.

Have your Easter cake and eat the Bicentennial too. Enough, Mister Sarcasm. Someone tapped him on the shoulder; he turned and saw Tina frowning a little at the mixed decorations.

"Pretty tacky," she said.

Jake chuckled. "Yeah." *God, she looks great.*

4

Like Jake, Tina was more prepared for an outing than a restaurant. She wore a long wool poncho woven in rich shades of brown; Jake thought it complemented her dark eyes and shimmering hair. The heavy wrap covered Tina's small frame nearly to her ankles, where he saw low-cut sneakers and the cuffs of tapered blue jeans. Her hand escaped the thick material at one side, holding a small, colorfully beaded purse.

"Nice, uh, poncho," he said.

"They called it a *gabán* in Tijuana; smallest one they had in these colors." She sounded apologetic. "Orie told me I really am into the hippie look."

"Her too?"

"She meant it nicely."

"Well, it works for you," he said, but she looked down. *Don't embarrass her, putz.* "Tina, what sounds good to eat?"

She raised her chin. "I'm not very hungry yet. You?"

"After all the junk I ate today, not really."

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

"Sure, where?"

"The ocean?"

"Great. Let's find a taxi."

"Do we need one?"

"We could walk to the bay, but the ocean's too far."

"What's the bay like?"

"More city; a lot of boats, docks, military stuff, but there are places to eat."

"Oh," she replied neutrally, but Jake thought she was unimpressed by that option.

"Okay," he said, "*el Océano Pacífico* it is. There should be taxis out front."

They left the lobby and Jake waved at a solitary lime green cab in the taxi zone. Jake zipped up his thin coat as they waited at the curb, facing an office

building. Regardless of San Diego's tropical reputation, the night was chilly, the overcast again threatening to descend as fog.

"Hi," Jake said to the driver as Tina climbed into the back of the sedan. "We'd like to get to the ocean, not the bay, with maybe a restaurant within walking distance."

"See what I can do," the cabby said with a faint southern accent. About Jake's age, the thin man had angry pimples on his chin, a sunburned left arm, and he wore a faded black and red letterman's coat with his new Dodger's cap.

Jake settled on the bench seat a foot or so from Tina. *Geez, should I touch her? Don't force it, Romeo.*

The driver exited and spoke loudly before Jake could say anything to Tina. "So you like the Cubs? When's the last time they won it all?" He turned the dispatch radio and music down low.

"O-eight; they lost it in forty-five," Jake called to him. "Then Durocher's four good years."

"And now they stink again."

"Yeah, afraid so. So you like the Bums?"

"They ain't bums no more."

"Except to the A's."

"Yeah, but Sutton beat 'em once. Like to see that Reuschel from your Cubs throw for L.A."

Jake laughed. "No way." He turned to Tina. In the uneven glow from the lights outside, she shrugged as if she had been listening to gibberish.

"Baseball talk—sorry," Jake said to her in a much lower tone; the driver attended to the traffic.

"It's okay." She glanced at his blue cap. "Where did he say that your team is from?"

"I don't think he did; you are priceless." Jake smiled, touching his hat. "The Chicago Cubs."

"But you're from Los Angeles."

"Just one of legions of Dodger haters."

"Why?"

"Okay, you asked," he warned. "Near to where I grew up, there was a settled community of Mexican immigrants in this big pastoral area right in the middle of L.A.—truck farms, sheep, the whole deal. The city cleared out most of them for urban renewal, and then they sold the land to the Dodgers. A lot of people despise them for that."

"Including you."

"Yes, and I have another reason. My heroes played for the L.A. Angels in

the minor leagues. When the Dodgers came from New York, some of my favorite players moved up to the Cubs; I stayed with them and the team ever since. The Bums still get my money; nothing better than watching the Cubs beat L.A. in person.” Jake smirked after he said those last few words loud enough so the cabby would hear.

“Believe it or not,” Tina said, “I know somebody else who doesn’t like the Dodgers.”

“Really, who?”

“My brother; he lives in New York.”

“Please tell me he’s not a Yankee fan.”

“No, he likes some other team.”

“The Mets. Yup, a lot of their fans hate the Dodgers for leaving.”

“Hey, sorry to interrupt all this Dodger hating,” the driver called back with a grin. “I’m heading for the public beaches north of town, but I don’t think there’s any place to eat close by.”

“If there’s a pay phone, we can ride back later to eat,” Jake told him, looking to Tina to see if she agreed.

“They have a phone there,” the driver answered.

“Jake,” Tina said, “we could just pick up a sandwich.”

“You sure?” Her suggestion gave him an inspiration. “Let’s have a picnic.”

“Really?” she asked, her brows raised.

“Yeah, I used to do this with my parents.” He looked up at the driver, raising his voice. “Uh, we just need five minutes at a market—any market. Okay?”

“Sure, I’ll find you one.” He turned his music higher to give them some privacy.

“Okay,” Tina said, “while he’s looking, it’s your turn to start. So you’re the youngest in your family, too?”

“Yeah, afraid so. I was such a butterball that the sisters called me Baby Huey.” He groaned. “Still call me Huey.”

Jake explained the plump comic book character, then told her a little about “the sisters,” as he sometimes referred to them, who all lived within fifty miles of Los Angeles. Caroline, the youngest, was a married biology teacher, no kids; then Hannah, an injury lawyer and single. The oldest, Joyce, was a suburban mom who made her siblings into an aunt or uncle four times over. “They’re stinkers, but pretty good little stinkers,” he said.

Tina grinned. “Does Uncle Jake see them a lot?”

“Unc, that’s what they call me; I see them when I can.” *Is this a test?*

“Why, Tina?”

She thought a moment. “Um, I don’t know. Was I too personal?”

Paranoid, Jake. “No, not at all.”

“When you mentioned Hannah’s work, you frowned.”

“Man, I’m *that* easy to read?” He sighed. “Hannah’s partner sued my mom’s hospital for negligence; it’s hung up in the system. She died four years ago, when I was still at home; I’m supposed to be a witness. I hate the whole damn thing, but Hannah will never let it go.” Jake turned away and watched the blur of lights come into focus as the taxi slowed in front of NACHO’S DELI-MART/GAS.

The cabby lowered the music again. “This place handle it for you?”

“This’ll be fine,” Jake told him.

“Okay, say hi to Nacho,” he said, parking by a red air dispenser. Jake and Tina got out; the driver was already loosening the little black cap on a front tire.

“My parents called this a ‘sperm picnic,’” Jake told Tina as he shoved the heavy door open.

She raised her faintly lined brows. “What?”

Jake chuckled. “I’ll explain later.” He saw right away that the grocery was more of a deli than he expected. There were two employees, a Latino couple in their thirties. The short, bulky dark-haired mom waited at the register, bright piñatas over her head. A baby slept in a crib behind her, cocooned in blankets.

In a stained butcher’s apron, a heavy man about five-eight with a trimmed black moustache worked behind a long counter. It doubled as a display case with loaves of wheat, white, and rye on top. Behind the glass, Jake saw a gastronomical meeting of cultures—from roast beef to chorizo, sharp cheese to headcheese, and potato salad to pico de gallo. Three pots steamed away on a stove below a wall menu listing burritos, deli sandwiches, and hoagies. The burritos were available in REGULAR or GRANDE, and with BERTA’S HOMEMADE FLOUR TORTILLAS.

A tall black man waited for an order while his young daughter perused the candy by the register. The proprietor handed a bulging brown sack over the counter, grease marks streaking the paper. “Okay, CJ, enjoy; you have a good evening,” he said with no accent.

“You too, Nacho,” the customer answered, starting over to the woman at the cash register.

Jake turned to Tina. “What looks good to you?”

“Not sure—whatever you have.”

“How’re you tonight?” Nacho asked them with a broad smile.

“Fine, thanks,” Jake answered. “Our taxi driver said to say hello.”

"Oh, green or yellow taxi?"

"Green."

"Max." Nacho chortled around a twitch of his moustache. "He was here for lunch; but say hi back. What can I get for you folks?"

"Uh, we'll have two chicken burritos, grandes. And a pint of fruit, the *pico de gallo*."

"You said that good." Nacho turned to stir a pot, still looking at Jake. "*¿Hablas español?*"

"*Más o menos, señor.*"

"Okay then, you want them *norteamericano, mediano, o picante?*"

Jake looked at Tina. "*¿Mediano?*"

She nodded. "*Por favor.*"

"*¿Tú hablas español también, señora?*" the storekeeper asked.

"*Sí, señor,*" Tina answered quietly.

"Well, I'll be." Grinning, Nacho looked over at his wife as he began preparing the food. "*Berta, the redhead and blonde speak the language,*" he yelled in Spanish.

"And they understand, Ignacio," she called back in English with a heavy accent, tsking.

Nacho winced. "Sorry, didn't mean nothin'. You guys teachers?"

"It's that obvious?" Jake replied with a laugh.

"No, no, no." As he worked, Nacho asked about what they taught and where they learned Spanish. Tina watched Jake explain a little about their backgrounds.

"*¿Sí, señora?*" Nacho said to Tina. "I didn't know there's a country in Africa where they speak Spanish."

When Tina just nodded again, Jake said, "Yeah, me either."

"Well, good for you two; good for you." Nacho's smile beamed with satisfaction as he put a sack on the counter. "Anything else you need?" he asked Jake.

"Uh, if you don't mind, we're going to eat picnic style. Maybe a couple plastic spoons—"

"Get you all set up." Nacho disappeared below.

Jake turned to Tina, raising his brows. "All set up, señora," he said softly, emphasizing 'señora.'

"Very funny," she whispered. "He's so nice."

"Yeah." Jake turned to the grocery aisles. "Let's see, it's traditional to have beer, cocktail peanuts, molasses cookies, and baloney; we'll pass on the baloney." He began to walk away. "Tina, unless you want a beer, choose something to drink, okay?"

Jake returned after a few minutes with his items as Nacho put another sack on the counter by a bottle of juice Tina had left there. Jake peeked into the non-food bag and found paper plates and cups, plastic utensils, napkins, and condiment packets.

“Uh, thank you very much, Nacho. By the way, I’m Jake; this is Tina.”

“Good to meet you; come by whenever you’re in town,” he said with another wide grin. “You two enjoy your dinner.”

After Tina left Nacho one of her reserved smiles, they carried everything over to the register. Berta had a sack open; Jake took a twenty from his wallet and handed it across to her after she finished packing the hot food, beer, juice, nuts and cookies.

“You pay only the grocery,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Jake asked.

“Ignacio, he likes somebody, first time free. *¿Loco, no?* But they come in always to talk and buy gum, maybe eat.” She gave him his change.

Jake held the money. “But we don’t even live here.”

Berta smiled. “Please enjoy the food.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” Jake picked up the large sack, Tina the picnic supplies; they turned to thank Nacho, but he was gone into a back room. They thanked Berta in Spanish and went out to the cab.

“Depending on traffic, maybe ten minutes to the beach,” the driver shouted back as they settled in.

“Thanks, no hurry. Nacho said hi, Max.”

“Nacho and Bertha’s good people.” He drove out the driveway, raising the radio volume again.

Jake turned to Tina. “Well, that was something.”

“We could find them tomorrow to uh, ‘talk and buy gum.’”

“Yeah. Maybe we can find something for our kids.”

“Good idea.” She glanced out where the tall buildings had given way mostly to one-story businesses and stucco apartments. “Okay, so your parents always had peanuts, cookies and baloney for these picnics?”

“That’s what *I* ate; maybe some fruit. For them it was mostly deli stuff—blue cheese, dill pickles, sardines, liverwurst, onions, salami, even pickled pig’s feet, for God’s sake. They’d spread all this gross food out on paper plates like it was a smorgasbord; make sandwiches on crackers or rye, and wash it down with Regal Lager, their favorite beer. Oh, Regal Lager is another palindrome Hannah discovered.”

“. . . L-L-A-G-E-R,” she said, finishing her thought aloud. “Glory, it sure is.”

“Anyway, they’d buy the quart bottle and pour it like fancy champagne

into those little glasses that cheese comes in. He was a drinker, but not an alky like most of his family. Mom kept a small suitcase in the car's trunk; it just had a blanket in it, those glasses, a paring knife and a can opener; everything else came from the grocery." Jake saw the cabby turn onto the freeway toward Los Angeles.

"So why was it, uh, a *sperm* picnic?"

"Ah, yes." Jake snickered, guessing that Tina's cheeks blushed in the near darkness. "There's a five-year gap between Caroline and me, so when she started dating, my parents hauled me along on all their weekend trips." He paused, turning more solemn.

"They died in sixty-nine and seventy-one, but they did something great, as if they knew they'd never retire. They took all their vacation; get this, and drove a Ford station wagon to Mexico City. Two years later, they took that same jalopy to Banff in Canada."

"It's wonderful they thought to do that."

"Yeah. They didn't have an L.A.-New York mentality like they lived at the hub of the world." Jake paused again. "Sorry, I got off the subject."

"It's okay; this is interesting."

"If you say so. Anyway, they knew every place within a day's drive that was the *opposite* of L.A.—ghost towns, apple orchards, small villages, Death Valley, Lake Arrowhead, and, of course, the ocean, but always at sunset after everybody was gone."

He mused a few seconds then chuckled. "Okay, so one Sunday, I was maybe ten, we took off in the car for the mountains and I asked if we'd be eating at a restaurant or if it would just be 'sperm of the moment' again at some grocery—" He stopped when Tina put a hand over her mouth, covering the first full smile he had seen from her.

"Sorry, you were so serious, then—" She tried to constrain herself, her eyes squinting with the effort, but she burst into laughter.

"Glad you think it's so funny," he said, pretending umbrage but delighting in her unexpected gaiety. "Anyway, after *they* stopped laughing, Mom explained the difference between spur and sperm." He saw Tina muffle her chortles behind both hands. "So, it became 'sperm of the moment' picnics, then 'sperm picnics.'"

Tina practically hooted then pulled a tissue out of her small purse, still laughing. "Okay, I get it." She dabbed some tears. "Don't say it again, okay?"

Jake smiled. "Sperm picnics?"

"That's not funny," she said, catching her breath.

"I didn't know you could laugh like this."

She glanced at the driver, who was dutifully ignoring them. “Well, now you know; it’s embarrassing.”

“No, it’s great.”

“Doesn’t happen often; I don’t control it very well.” She exhaled loudly. “Just a minute, please.” She made a final titter and looked out at the lights streaking by. “All right, I’m over it.” Still grinning a little, Tina kept looking out of the window.

Jake leaned across, his shoulder against hers, craning his neck to see a billboard: COMING SOON – EL DORADO VISTA – OCEAN VIEW COLONIALS – \$79,995 AND UP. He sat up, their arms still touching; he noticed Tina didn’t move away.

“One of our rides,” he said, “was down to San Juan Capistrano then here to my cousin’s. Back then, L.A. to San Diego was orchards, countryside, and beaches. Won’t be long before the Marine base will be the only land left.”

“That’s a shame. I’ve missed the ocean so much; I’m so glad we did this.” In the flashes of light, he saw she was somber again. “Jake, you told Nacho you learned some Spanish in Mexico and Costa Rica. Traveling?”

“Some, and I was in school in Mexico City for a summer. After I finished my B.A., I tried to do my bit in the Peace Corps, remembering JFK and all that. I was in Texas, then Costa Rica; came home in six months with, uh, humiliating stomach problems. Then I took my fifth year and student teaching; the rest is pedagogical history.”

“I want to hear about your teaching and your travels, but do you mind telling me how your parents died?”

An inch or so away from her, he sighed. “Well, you’re no stranger to cancer. My parents died two years apart of the same kind, not isolated; they had it all over.”

“I’m sorry, Jake. Losing them so close together must have been really hard.”

“Yeah. When Mom got it, we knew the score from Dad; Hannah was on the doctors, but I tend to blame L.A. and the damn cigarettes. Smoked into their forties before they quit, and they breathed the crappy air every day, driving to that airplane plant where they worked. They joked that they left town so much just to breathe all the way in.”

“Is that partly why you live in Orange County?”

“I guess, but it’s just as bad.”

“Where would you like to live?”

He combined a scoff with a chuckle. “Oh, I guess a town with a strong sense of community, but spread out and close to some wilderness. To make it a total pipe dream, a place with some tolerance for individual differences.”

"I don't think that's so unreasonable. Where would you look?"

"I'm thinking about the Southwest. Plenty of work there, and I like the whole idea of trying out a place for a few years then moving on—kind of a benefit of teaching."

"You also seem pretty dedicated to your work."

"Yeah, so do you, Ms. Linn," he said, grinning. "I do have, uh, a hobby—I write some short stories and verse."

"Really? Then why not teach creative writing?"

"Maybe after I feel like I know what I'm doing. I'll stick with practical writing for now."

"I think you probably have a passion for both writing and teaching, like your father's acting."

He scoffed quietly. "Maybe so."

"Can you tell me more about him?"

"Okay." Jake paused. "Dad's stage name was Jake Dylan; he was into Dylan Thomas. Ergo, my full name—Jake Dylan Friend." He told Tina about a favorite photo of his father and an actress mugging toward baby Jake, used as a stage prop, sitting on a table in diapers and laughing. Jake went on to tell her a little more about his father's acting.

"It must have been fun to be around all that," Tina said. "Is your name Jacob on your birth certificate?"

"Nope, just plain Jake, like it's all *jake* with me."

"What?"

"It means *okay*. One of my dad's old expressions."

"And Friend? It sounds like Quakers."

Jake saw the cabby head for a freeway exit. "Not quite. William Friend, his real name, was raised a Mormon in Cedar City, Utah. My grandparents were Welsh-Irish jack Mormons; the only thing they did that pleased the church was to have six kids. Anyway, during the Depression they moved to L.A. and got lost in the crowd."

"What about your mother?"

"Would you believe her name was Rose Pearlman?"

"Jewish?"

"Yup, and from New Jersey, but not a practicing Jew; though she did speak fluent Yiddish."

"And what about you?"

"I know maybe thirty or forty words."

"I guess I meant the religion."

Jake sniggered. "A gentile-gentile; Mormons and Jews use the same word."

I'm just one of the multitudes of half-Jewish agnostics. Does that bother you?"

"No. Tell me more about your mother."

Pleased that his lack of religion didn't seem to be a problem, he described the trouble Rose had when she married William Friend, who was as goy as they come. Rose was ostracized for years by her own mother, Jake's grandma, who actually refused to hold their firstborn, Joyce.

Jake explained that Rose Friend's refuge was her own art, which fit perfectly with the traveling she did with William. An avid amateur photographer, she had her own dark room and specialized in natural scenery.

"Okay," Jake said, "now I think you know way more about my family. What about your mom? It doesn't sound like you two get along so great."

Tina had turned to look out. "Jake, I think we're getting close to the beach."

Man, she cut that off fast.

5

In the rearview mirror of his truck, Jake saw the door of the La Cholla P.D. squad car open, but Jesús got out, not Captain LeBlanc. *Thank God.* Jake put his left arm on the sill and watched him come to the window.

“What the hell happened to you?” Jesús pointed at Jake’s arm.

He looked down to see coagulated blood smeared all over his left bicep, some of it stained into the sleeve of his summer shirt. “Guess I scratched it under the seat, searching for my wallet; looks worse than it is.”

“If you say so. You find the wallet, Jake?”

“No.”

“Jesus. Well, I’m glad you stopped when you did or you’d be in some real trouble.”

“I was going to tell LeBlanc the parade was in my way; truth is—”

“Save it. Lucky for you, he’s heading south in the old Ford.”

“So now what? I’ve got to get to the hospital.”

Jesús pushed his sunglasses up to his forehead; his dark eyebrows furrowed with concern. “What’s wrong with the baby, Jake?”

“She’s breathing too fast. Serna and the nurses say it’s ‘high-normal,’ some such crap. They think we’re troublemakers.”

“You and Tina?”

“And María Juana.”

Jesús winced. “Not good, she’s usually right about these things, even if some of the hospital staff won’t admit it. What are your options?”

“Old Doctor McNally, I guess.”

“I doubt he’s here. What about the university?”

“I’d have to do paperwork, get an ambulance; I’m not sure there’s time for all that—I don’t know. For starters, I just need to get back there.”

“Take you forever in the truck. C’mon, hop in.”

“Your car?”

“Can’t have you driving around without a license. Let’s go.” Jesús turned around; Jake jumped out and ran to catch up with him.

“You know what the locals call María?” Jesús asked as they opened the doors of the idling squad car.

“*Curandera?*”

They got into the cool interior and put on their seatbelts. “No, she’s not much into herbs, potions and all that.” Jesús put the transmission in gear. “They call her *la vigilante*, because she watches over all the babies.” As he drove away, Jesús reported on the radio, then hit the siren.

Unaccustomed to the speed, Jake held on tight going down the first hill. *Something’s finally going right.* “I appreciate this a lot, Jesús.”

“Yeah. Eventually, you have to deal with the tickets; I think I can keep it to traffic violations.”

“Thanks again.”

“Sure. That’s all just small potatoes compared to your kid.”



The cabby stopped at the barrier of a closed parking lot. Jake gave him a good tip; Max said he was on all night and left his dispatcher’s number.

Sacks in hand, Jake and Tina ducked under an iron pole and started across the lot in the dark. The *whump-thump* of the crashing surf seemed very near; ahead they saw dim outlines of a low building and three squatty palms. Approaching the structure, they ducked under another pole.

“Are we breaking some law?” Tina asked as she stood.

“No, there’s a couple cars parked back on the road; look out there.” He pointed to a flickering campfire ahead that threw light and shadows on a lifeguard tower. “They just want to keep cars off the beach.”

They walked around a cinderblock wall that surrounded the bathroom alcove, where Jake knew there were probably sand showers. On the ocean side of the building, they saw a single light near the phone booth and walked over to it.

“All the comforts of home,” he said, turning to her.

Tina pointed at the payphone. “Look.” Its metal plating crusted turquoise from the damp salt air, the phone’s receiver was hanging in the slot without a cable.

“Hm, that’s a problem.”

“What do you want to do?”

“It’s two or three miles back to the freeway exit; I saw a gas station there.”

“That’s not very far.”

"You want to start back or go on with the picnic?"

"We're so close." She put down the bag of utensils. Tina stood on one leg and pulled off a sneaker. "I came to walk in the ocean." She slipped off the sock then switched legs.

"Isn't it sort of cold for that?"

"I have a sweatshirt on under here." Her footwear vanished under the heavy wrap. "Ready?" she asked, straight faced, picking up a bag.

"Yeah. You're too much," Jake said with an appreciative laugh. "I'll stick with shoes."

Beneath a dense curtain of overcast, they walked onto the beach toward the guard tower. Luminescent streaks of foam in the rolling waves gave off just enough light to make out a fifty-five gallon barrel ahead. On the other side of the tower, they saw a solitary angler near the small fire, fooling with one of those tall, embedded fishing poles.

Tina moved easily in bare feet; Jake kept up until his shoes were full of sand. "Hang on," he said, sitting to remove them. Loaded down with the food sack and his footwear, he trudged on, thinking the dry sand was unexpectedly cold on his feet. Tina waited a few seconds then ran on ahead, leaving the bag between the trash barrel and the water.

Her silhouette set off by the bright foam, she romped in the shallows; he saw the gabán scrunched up away from the water. As soon as Jake's toes touched the wet sand, a chill shuddered up his back. He retreated to dry ground, zipping up the windbreaker and pulling the flimsy excuse for a hood over his head.

He put the food with the other sack and looked across at the fisherman, now bundled in a blanket and carrying the pole away from the dying fire. Tina ran up to Jake, lucent strands of her hair reflecting the scant light and blowing wildly in the breeze toward shore.

"Cold?" she called out.

"I'm okay." He stuffed both hands in his pockets.

"That was so fun, but my calves are frozen; didn't think it would be *that* cold."

"The Pacific isn't very warm here, even in summer."

"Seems strange—palm trees and all." She knelt in the sand, making a sort of teepee around herself with the heavy gabán. Tina gathered her hair under the collar; Jake watched her elbows and arms jostling beneath the material. Then she stood, her feet below in the white sneakers again, no socks. "That's better," she said, and they started to amble slowly away from the tower on firm wet sand.

Over the racket of Jake's coat flapping in the steady light wind, they chatted about their travels for a few minutes until Jake asked if she was getting hungry.

"Sure am." They turned back. "Jake, it's pretty chilly for a picnic; you want to walk out and eat on the way?"

"We could, but somebody left us a little fire." He pointed ahead past the guard tower.

"He's gone? Oh yes, let's do that."

Tina and Jake jogged from there to retrieve the bags, then they circled the tower's ramp. The small fire pit had a log nearby, but the man left no wood to feed the weak flames. They ransacked around in the dark, finding only a sports section in the barrel and some driftwood twigs. Tina twisted the newspaper into kindling, then dumped the utensils into the food sack. She started to wring the bag and extra paper plates like washrags.

After putting on his shoes, Jake rolled the log closer to the pit, watching Tina and noticing that a modest smile had endured on her face since she came out of the ocean. *Like she never had much chance to act like a kid. Her mother's work, I bet.*

He put most of the pile she made on the fire; they sat in the sand, backs to the driftwood trunk, silently holding their hands up to the poor flames for a few seconds. Jake took out the utensils, drinks, fruit, and the thick burritos. They began to peel off the layers of foil.

"Still a bit warm—look at the size of this; I'll have to save some." Tina took a bite. "Yum."

Jake answered after a swallow. "Yeah, real homemade; you can be glad it isn't *picante*." He swigged from one of the two cans of beer he bought.

"Oh, my," she said after the spicy chicken settled in her taste buds. She took a swallow of juice; he opened the pint of fruit, put some on a paper plate and held it between them.

She took a section of orange and ate it. "Thought so, it's hot, too."

"Pico de gallo, another way to warm up."

"It's all so delicious, just a bit hotter than what I'm used to. Those cookies are going to taste good."

They ate quietly for a while, watching the churning waves. Tina wrapped half of her burrito in foil and took another bite of fruit. "Mm, so good." She held up the next piece on a plastic fork near Jake's face. "You know what this one is?"

"Can't see it," he said, and she inserted the cube into his mouth. "Thanks." Jake chewed. "It's *jicama*, a kind of root." He finished the last of his beer.

“Really?” She savored another piece, still with the understated smile. “Jake, this is so much more fun than any restaurant.” Tina turned to him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, his earnestness in contrast to her high spirits. Jake stood up to think, shivered again, and put the dregs of their meager fuel on the fire. He rubbed his hands over the heat.

“Something wrong?” she asked as he sat down.

“Why?”

“Your eyebrows tell all.”

“So I’ve heard.” He started to gather the trash. “Don’t mind me; I really am glad you’re enjoying this so much.”

Tina put her leftover burrito in the sack and helped him put everything in, except the cookies and peanuts. They leaned back on the log, watching the surf.

“Jake, just tell me what’s bothering you.”

“Okay. Earlier, you avoided my question about your mother.”

“I know.” Her face turned somber in the uneven light. “You had it right; we don’t get along, but that’s nothing new.”

“I probably shouldn’t have brought it up. If you don’t feel like talking about it—”

“It’s okay, a little reality won’t hurt.” Tina thought for a moment. “My mom has always been in charge of everything—my father, my brother, me; the church. She’s the real evangelical; she’d consider your Mormon relatives to be cultists, and the Jewish ones misguided.”

“There’s probably some truth to that—as long as she knows her brand of religion isn’t any better.”

“No, there’s one perfect way for her. Mom pretends to be accepting of other religions, but she isn’t.”

“So non-believers must be evil.”

“Worse. You wouldn’t want to hear.”

He picked up the cookies, pulled apart the end of the package and held them out to her. Tina took one, bit into it; Jake did the same.

“Mm, chewy,” she said.

“Yeah, stale—just how I like them.”

“They’re good.”

Jake swallowed. “So, you don’t get along with your mother because you, uh, don’t buy into her, uh—?”

“Ignorance?” Tina tongued some molasses off her teeth. “She just assumes that I agree with her take on Christianity. Jimmy and I are more like Dad.”

“Which is?”

“Sure you want to hear all this?”

“I do.” Jake’s neck and back shuddered; he got up and knelt toward the pit, palms out, coaxing the last of the warmth.

“Remember, you asked for it.”

“Okay, I’m duly warned.” He smiled, and then sat with her near the log.

“You’ve heard of the good Samaritan.”

“Just the basic idea.”

“It’s actually one of the best stories. Okay, Cliff Notes version.” Tina faced the waves. “Jesus advised this lawyer that he could gain eternal life by loving ‘thy neighbor as thy self,’ that line everyone knows. So the lawyer asked, ‘Who’s my neighbor?’ Jesus told him about a wounded traveler who was ignored—first by a teacher, then a preacher. So a Samaritan came by, and they were outcasts to most of the Jews. He, of course, saves the traveler, but this is the best part: Jesus asks the lawyer, ‘Who is your neighbor—the teacher, the preacher, or the outcast?’” Tina turned to Jake. “The rest is obvious.”

“So it’s as much about hypocrisy as charity.”

“Yes, which is how my father always taught it.” She faced the sea again.

“That made your mother mad?” Jake felt his teeth chatter; he stood up to keep moving while he listened.

“She’d just be dismissive, as if Dad was some naive child. She’s very intelligent—knows the Bible chapter and verse. The sad irony is she doesn’t get the important things. She’d work with Dad for hours on his sermons, but he’d rather have been studying. He was into the similarities between religions.

“I do remember one time Mom was furious with him. She got back from a trip and found out what he preached to some church officials who came by on a pop-in visit. He quoted Jesus telling some spiritual leaders that they were like ‘whitewashed tombs—outside beautiful and righteous but inside full of hypocrisy and wickedness.’” Tina sighed. “That’s pretty close, I think.”

“I never heard that one before; good for Jesus,” Jake said, not intending sarcasm as he sat down.

Tina turned to him. “She accused Dad of disrespecting the visitors; he said it was a message we *all* needed to hear. It was one of the only times she couldn’t pretend things were just the way she wanted. His next sermon was by the book, but the people knew; they loved him and pretty much feared her.” Tina paused, looking away. “I can’t believe I bored you with all this.”

Jake trembled again, trying not to show it by pressing his elbows into his sides. “It wasn’t boring at all. So, how did she treat you and your brother when you were kids?”

“We did mostly what we were told. As long as we acted like good little *mish* kids, she assumed that’s who we were. Jimmy inherited her brains—he’s Mom’s genius, though he never acts like that. He keeps up appearances around her; the rest of the time he’s just Jimmy.”

“And you’re Tina, not Christina, but still in the church.”

She looked at him, her normally symmetrical face askew, as if asking herself something. “I tried some Zen and other stuff, but I came back.” Tina paused, sighed, and turned to stare at the last of the glowing embers. “I’ve read a lot about Gandhi and Doctor King, and there’s an Anglican minister in South Africa who nobody here has probably heard of—Desmond Tutu.”

“I want to hear about him, but I’d like to ask you one more thing.”

“My answer is yes, I would like another cookie.”

In the near darkness, Jake could barely see the hint of a smile on her face as he handed her the package. “Sorry, that’s not my question,” he said with a grin. Jake stood, hopping on his toes.

“Jake, you *are* getting cold.” She put the cookies down.

“I’m okay; hang on.” He quickly removed the jacket, rolled down his long sleeves then put the windbreaker back on, pulling over the hood. “Okay, would you agree that your mother didn’t expect much from you?” He stood by the fire pit, hands deep in his pockets.

“Actually, she expected perfection. I’m her disappointment—B’s in school, working with Catholics, twenty-four years old and not married. Jimmy isn’t either, but that isn’t a problem for her.”

“That’s all such BS.”

“You sound like my brother.”

“Good for him. I take it he’s not a preacher.” Jake jogged slowly in place.

“No, but she wanted him to be one. Jimmy has his master’s in physics, halfway to his doctorate.”

“Good for him again. Now I sort of get that crack you made today.”

She creased her brows. “What crack?”

“You said you aren’t as shy around your kids, implying that you’re on the same intelligence level.”

“Well, some of them are very smart, but they aren’t old enough to, uh—” She looked down at the ashes.

“To what?” Jake sounded like he dared her to finish.

“I’m not sure.”

“I think you’re saying they don’t know enough to intimidate you. Maybe that’s your mother, saying *you’re* not smart enough. Sounds like she treated your dad the same way. Don’t you think *he* was smart?”

Jake sat down next to her and saw a tear reflecting the light from the waves, curving down her cheek. *Now I've done it.* "I'm sorry I upset you, Tina."

"No, there's no controlling my waterworks." She inhaled, sniffing and looking out to sea again. "My dad *was* smart, but he wasn't ambitious in the way she wanted; that's what really got to her."

"Well, all I know is that she's wrong about you."

"Jake, you don't really know me."

"That's right, I don't." Jake touched the gabán so she would look at him. "But I know enough to recognize an intelligent person when I meet one."

She thought about what he said, drying her face with the edge of her wrap. "I hope you don't expect that to suddenly improve my self-esteem," she said quietly with a touch of sarcasm.

"No, even though it is the truth. And that's not some line I'm using on you."

"Don't worry, I'm quite sure it isn't a line."

"What does that mean?" Jake stood up yet again, arms folded on his chest.

"Using a line on me—that'd be some conquest."

He looked down at her, shaking his head. "Ah, because you don't think you're desirable," he said, and she responded by forcing air through her teeth. "Why are you scoffing, Tina? Look, I'm a male of the species; if I didn't like you, I probably *would* be trying some line. You're a smart, attractive woman, regardless of your mother's so-called morals and her warped ideas of perfection. Well, to hell with all that."

Jake shivered, trying again not to show it while Tina watched the sea. He sat back down. "How do you act when you're around her?"

"Say nothing, do the minimum to keep the peace, and get away as soon as I can. I don't remember really hugging her since I was ten." Tina frowned and chuckled at once. "It's kind of sad, but Jimmy and I sometimes laugh about it when we see each other. He'll say, 'What'll it be, Dad-hug or Mom-hug?'" Tina paused. "I miss Jimmy."

"He sounds like a great guy."

"Yes." She turned to Jake. "My gosh, you're shaking like a leaf."

"I'm okay."

"That jacket's nothing; get under here and get warm."

"You trust me?"

"Oh, I forgot," she said wryly, "you're a male of the species who finds me desirable."

"That's not funny; I do."

"Well, I trust you. It has a wide collar; we can both look out the top."

He scooted closer, she lifted the gabán over him, and they poked their heads up through the opening, facing the water, their sides touching.

"Much better, thanks," he said, his teeth chattering.

"You're trembling; you could be hypothermic. I'm just going to help warm you up." She reached over, placing her arm around his other shoulder; he could barely feel it.

"Don't take advantage of me, Ms. Linn." He shuddered again.

"Relax, John Wayne, it's just a Mom-hug. Isn't there some two-headed beast like this in *Alice in Wonderland*?"

Jake chuckled. "There should be." They were quiet for several seconds.

"Is that better, Jake?"

"Feel th-this," he stuttered. Jake searched for her hand, but she found his first; her warmth spread through his fingers. *Man, is it the heat, or because you're touching her?* "Pretty ch-cheap trick t-to hold hands, huh?"

"Glory, you're freezing. You didn't even go in the water; how'd you get so cold?"

"G-guess I'm not dressed for s-sunny San Diego."

Tina found his other hand, bundled all his icy fingers in the sweatshirt material outside her abdomen, then scooted up and put both her arms around him.

My God. "Th-this qualify as a D-dad-hug?"

"Shh, you need to get warm. Look, it's dark as ink; the only light is coming from the water." They stared at the breakers for a couple of minutes while Jake warmed up.

"It is amazing," Jake finally said, the shivers almost gone. "*You're amazing, Tina Linn.*"

"Don't get carried away." She held him tighter. "I'm a glorified hot water bottle."

"That's crap. I have a good name for you."

"What? *Ms. Linn*?"

"Nah, it's *Tina, la gabacha Latina.*"

"¿*Gabacha*?"

"In Mexico, *gabacho* is more common than *gringo*. Let's see, we'll make it 'Tina Latina' for short."

"Well, I guess that makes you the first person to name me since my mother."

"I name everything I like, even my truck."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should." Jake laughed. "I like you better than my truck."

"Thanks a lot."

Now what, Romeo? "Uh, no more shivering, thanks to you and your tent," he said, and then sighed. "Maybe we should get back."

“If that’s what you want.”

“You aren’t worried about finding a taxi?”

“I’m not worried about anything.”

He removed his warmed hands from Tina’s solar plexus and encircled her with his arms, holding tight.

“Mm,” she said, “that’s a Jake-hug, I think.”

6

Jake woke up in pitch darkness around midnight, he guessed, naked from the waist down but not cold. She was similarly dressed; he surrounded her with his arms and one leg. The gabán not only covered them but they had tucked one side of it underneath to separate their bodies from the sand.

Man, what in hell have you done? The thought coincided with his low, brief moan.

“Jake, I really do want another cookie.”

He let one arm go and his leg. “You’re awake?”

“Yes, you snore a bit.”

“I do?”

“Well, a little more than a bit.”

“Sorry.”

“I wasn’t sleepy anyway.”

“Shall we go up top and find the cookies?”

Tina chortled. “Maybe we should find our bottoms first.”

“Uh-oh, are you going to lose it again?”

“No.” She sat up in the dark, searching for her clothes. They both got dressed, and then pulled the gabán out from under. They sat in the sand, inserting their heads up through the slit again.

“The two-headed beast returns,” she said.

Jake chuckled, then they silently watched a sliver of moon peek in and out of the thinning overcast; it reflected intermittently on the sea.

“It’s beautiful,” she mumbled, squeezing his arm.

“Yeah, it is.” Stretching his legs out, Jake flapped up his side of the gabán and pulled in the cookies, taking out two. He stuck them up between his face and hers.

“Yum,” she said, but Jake pinched the cookies together with a finger and thumb, making one molasses glob.

“Koo-gie.” His voice was throaty and gruff like the Sesame Street character. Jake took an exaggerated bite.

“Cookie Monster got to share,” Tina told him in a falsetto whine.

“Shh, me no have two heads.” Jake kept chewing.

“I go get Bob and María,” she warned in the high-pitched voice.

“Oh no, not them. Me share with cutie monster.” He put the glob to her mouth; she took a bite. “How come cutie monster know Koogie,” Jake asked, “but not big-shot cowboy?”

Tina grinned. “Everybody know you, Cookie.”

With a second molasses ball, Jake and Tina finished their silly play, then held each other and kissed. His arm around her, they watched the waves silently, mesmerized again by the pounding surf.

“Latina?”

“You weren’t kidding about the name?”

“Two names—Latina and cutie.”

“Okay, I like Latina, but I’m not—”

“Koogie say yes,” he said with the deep tone again, putting his forefinger up through the hole to wag it at her.

“Oh brother.”

He lowered his hand; they embraced, watching the ocean again. “Man,” he said in a normal voice, “the waves seem like they’re really crashing now.”

“Maybe it’s because we’re outside again.” They listened and watched, Jake still holding her.

A minute or so later, Tina said, “You started to ask me something.”

“Yeah.” He exhaled heavily. “Maybe I ask too many questions.”

“Go ahead, Jake.”

“All right. Uh, I didn’t hurt you did I?”

“Of course you didn’t. You were very gentle but, um, passionate.” She looked at the sea, then let go, except for his hand. “Jake, I should tell you . . .” She sighed. “When this night started I wasn’t, uh, a . . .”

“So? You don’t have to tell me that.” Jake’s tone was fervent. “It’s dumb the way this works.” He paused; she caressed his fingers. “If a man’s a virgin, he’s not a *real* man, but if a woman’s *not* a virgin, you’re supposed to be ashamed. It’s stupid.”

Tina nodded. “Well, believe me, I was ashamed.”

“Okay,” he said, more calmly, “you don’t have to say any more about it.”

“Jake, I want to.” She heaved another sigh. “I worked on a cruise ship one summer in college.” She paused; Jake could just hear her over the breakers. “I was rebelling a lot; decided I had to try, uh, *it*. I don’t drink much, but I got pretty drunk with this guy. When I told my roommate, she said I was raped, but I knew what I was doing. He was cold, kind of rough, penetrated once and

finished, enough to change my, um, status, and leave me not very interested in sex. I felt empty after the whole thing.”

She turned from the sea, tears welling up. “It was so different with you. Like I said, you were considerate, and I, uh, enjoyed it; I didn’t even know I could.” She lifted the fringe of the gabán to dab her eyes.

Now what do I say? He took her warm hand again. “Uh, Tina, I’m not exactly Don Juan, you know. My, uh, experience—” Jake stopped to scoff at himself.

“Jake, the only thing I—”

“Hang on. You told *me*—so here it is. Mostly, it was a few times with prostitutes. I rationalized that it’s just business for them. But there were a couple other women I knew, uh, biblically. Why do they say that, anyway?”

“Well, if it says in the Bible she *knew* no man, it means she didn’t have—”

“Oh. Now you must think *I’m* slow.”

Ignoring his self scorn, she said, “Jake, do you mind telling me how you felt after being with them?”

“Uh, the truth is, mostly guilty. I crave the physical part of it, like any man, I guess, but I can’t stand the whole stupid game. If I felt like somebody thought I used her, I was guilty for days.”

She sniffled once. “Well, you didn’t use me; I wanted this, too.”

My God. He let go of her hand and hugged her tightly with both arms. “I’m not sure what to say, Tina.”

“It’s okay, neither am I.”

He kept one arm around her. “I do know that I already care about you. I don’t want this to be the end of it.”

Tina turned to him. “Me either, Jake. See? As usual, you *did* know what to say. You’re very sweet.”

Their lips barely touched when Jake suddenly pulled away, startled. “What the hell was that?”

“What?”

“Something touched my leg.” He reached down to his calf. “Jesus, my pant leg’s wet.”

“High tide!” she shouted, but before they stood all the way up, seawater inundated their shoes and ankles.

“Run!” he yelled, ducking out from under the gabán. Mildly alarmed but laughing, they grasped hands and started sloshing against the water flowing back to sea; Jake saw something floating by. “Hey, there go the cookies.” He let go of her to snatch the package but lost his balance, falling to his knees in two or three inches of water. “I got ’em!” Jake yelled, and then guffawed, holding the package over his head as if it were a great prize.

Tina reached down for him. “Way to go, Cookie Monster; get up.”

He stood, laughing as she took his hand. The seawater was gone, but the next wave *ka-thumped* behind them.

“Let’s go!” she shouted, more enthused than desperate. They ran-trudged together up the soft sand. Jake turned back and saw foam approaching, much higher than the first onslaught; he knew they weren’t going to get away.

Damn. “Stop, Tina, brace for it; we can’t fall over in this one.”

“I didn’t fall over,” she said, snickering. Her other arm darted out from the side of the gabán. She clutched onto him; he dropped the cookies.

This isn’t funny anymore. He tried to envelope her tightly as the sea rumbled around and beyond them, above Jake’s calves. Then, for a few moments, the water turned calm as a lake; now well over his knees and almost up to her waist. They managed a step or two before the force of the outflow began, trying to sweep them away.

Shit! “Tina, hold on tight, lean into the current.” Jake forced his back leg into the sand as a brace; the detritus in the water flicked against his body while the grains around his buried foot started melting away. *Don’t lose it, damn it.* The last seconds of backwater seemed like a full minute, but they held their ground.

“You okay?” Tina asked, pulling on his arm as he strained to extract his back calf from the muck.

“I’m fine.” He freed himself from the suction. The next wave crashed, but they slogged away to more stable sand and moved faster, making for dry land without looking back. The wave caught them again, but only enough to drown their shoes and make them slosh through the water one last time.

“Made it!” Jake shouted. He and Tina hobbled hand in hand through the dry sand up to the showers, lightheaded from the adventure and each other’s company. They laughed at their mostly ineffectual attempts to remove the sand and seawater from their clothes. Convinced that her gabán was ruined, Tina hauled it along anyway as they started hiking across the parking lot.

They moved at a good clip on the asphalt, the vigorous exercise holding off any chills. About halfway back to the freeway exit, a guard on security rounds stopped to give them a ride to the gas station, scolding them mildly for their foolishness.

While they waited for the cab, the clerk let them stand inside where they shared a concoction of hot chocolate and coffee. It wasn’t Max who showed up, so they didn’t bother to explain to the driver their “drowned rat” appearance or the wet money they laughed about when Jake paid the cab fare at the hotel.

Armando was just turning off the TV when Jake got up to the room at about one-fifteen. "Damn, Skip, you got drunk with her?" he asked when he got a good look at him.

"No, I'm just a tad wet." Jake, still giddy, realized he had a goofy grin on his face.

"Un-frigging believable. Okay, so tell me about it, lover-boy."

Trying to be serious, Jake said, "Tomorrow, okay? I need a hot shower and some sleep."



For Tina and Jake, the second day of the conference was even less professionally stimulating than the first. They spent much of the day together, still chuckling at times over their damp escapade. Separately, they explained the last part of their previous evening to Ori and Armando, who, unimpressed, came up with similar versions of, "I guess you had to be there." Jake and Tina had another laugh when they discovered that their friends had reacted about the same.

Armando also told Jake he had other plans for that night, so he made the gesture of giving up the room for the "love birds." Jake called his cousin again to apologize, setting up a time to have breakfast with him on Saturday.

That evening, Jake and Tina decided they owed themselves some seafood and walked down to the bay for dinner at a small chowder house. Talking at their table until the place closed, they took a taxi back to the hotel.

Jake held the room's door for Tina and followed her inside. "No sand to sit on; guess this will have to do." Jake had left his grey canvas bag on the bed; he walked over to remove it.

Tina put her big flag purse next to a straight-backed chair in the corner, and sat. "Yes, it certainly isn't the beach." She folded her hands on her lap.

This is bothering her. "Want to watch TV for a while?"

"No thanks."

"Shucks, ma'am," he said in a bad Slim Pickins accent. Jake sauntered slowly over to her as if he lugged rocks in his pockets. He took her hand. "I truly am hankerin' to git to know y'all better, ma'am."

"In the biblical sense, sir?" she asked, a smile barely creasing one side of her mouth.

"Gosh, ma'am, I'd be mighty obliged."

"Glory, I'm sleeping with a famous cowboy."

After Jake met his cousin on Saturday morning, the conference finished

with two sessions and a salad bar/raffle designed to keep people around. Tina and Jake parted with the understanding that they would speak by phone often, and he would drive up to see her at spring break, which happened to be on the first actual day of spring for both of their school districts. Verbally, they made no other commitment beyond that they cared about each other, deciding independently it would be premature at this point in their relationship to even mention the word *love*.

7

Jake thought it took Jesús less than a minute to drive the squad car to the hospital. He parked at emergency; they went right in and found Ben waiting there.

“Maestro, I am sorry. I come back.”

“I see that. Let’s go, Ben; there’s nothing to be sorry about.” Jake passed him and strode right down the hallway, Ben and Jesús behind. “Ben, you must have seen Captain LeBlanc before you got out of the truck,” Jake said back to him. “Right?”

“*Sí, maestro.*”

Jake looked at Jesús as he caught up. “My students are afraid of half of the police force.”

“They should be,” the sergeant mumbled.

The three of them slowed down just before the nursery. The charge nurse pattered in the back room near Emma’s incubator; María was with the sleeping twins. Jake knocked lightly on the glass so as not to disturb the babies. María saw his bloody arm, then went directly to the sink. A few seconds later, Jesús held the door for her as she came out.

“*Sargento,*” she said to him.

“*Señora,*” Jesús answered, his tone deferential.

María smiled at Ben; he nodded back, and she walked to Jake with a damp washrag and a towel.

“*No es nada, señora,*” Jake told her as she cleaned the cut. “*¿How is the baby?*”

She finished drying his arm, put the used rag inside the towel, and gave him a tiny tube of ointment and plastic bandages from her pocket. “*Señor Fren, la niña, her breathing is faster, and still she does not move, only her chest. I am sorry; I think she is worse.*”

“*¿And the nurse; what is she doing?*”

“She said Doctor McNally left permission to increase the oxygen a little. She is doing that now; she already called Doctor Serna. He has not called back.”

“He’s in the parade with the mayor,” Jake told her. “It should almost be finished.” He put the bandages and tube in his pocket.

“I don’t think so,” Jesús said, and then changed to Spanish. “The parade will go slow at the border, señora, then the two mayors speak at the plaza before the fiesta there. It could be hours; it depends on when the doctor checks his calls.”

María started frowning before Jesús finished. *“We cannot wait; the child is very sick.”*

After María’s pronouncement, Jake looked helplessly at Jesús. *“Guess I’ll start the paperwork to move the baby; I don’t know what else to do.”*

“I can find Serna.”

“He might not listen, even to you.”

“He’ll listen. I’m going.” Jesús took a first step to leave.

“Sargento,” María said.

He stopped and turned to her. *“¿Señora?”*

“We need to try in two ways.” She looked at Ben. “¿Mijo, do you know the clinic of Doctor Castilleja?”

“Sí, señora, but it is Sunday.”

“Sometimes he opens anyway. If not, go to his apartment in back. Use my name; he will come with the maestro.”

“Señora,” Jake said, “the hospital is not going to allow—”

“Señor Fren, this doctor has an American diploma, and I have a plan for him to get in.”

Jake stared at her for just a moment. *“Okay. That’s good enough for me.”*

“Vámanos,” Jesús said. “I’ll drop you and Ben at your truck, then you can follow me to the border.”

Jake, Jesús and Ben ran out through emergency and got in the squad car. Jesús put his flashers on, no siren, and sped up the hill, Ben shrinking down into the back seat.

“Are you going to get in trouble for doing this?” Jake asked, holding onto the bar above the door.

“No, I have my lunch hour coming.”

“You know anything about this doctor?”

“Just that he’s over here sometimes to help the poor. I hear he’s a good guy; I don’t know anything about his doctoring.”

“Do you think María can get him into the hospital?”

“I don’t know; she does have her ways.”



The new couple had little time to worry about their interrupted affair. Jake and Armando's program had three busy weeks planned before vacation, including an all-day tour for their seniors of the same state university in Los Angeles Jake had attended.

On top of her usual challenges, Tina would be working hard with Orié to help their students survive a school-wide spring pageant and not be disparaged again as "those special ed. kids who ruin everything."

Nevertheless, Jake and Tina chatted long distance three or four times each week, mostly sharing school-related anecdotes and filling each other in on some personal and family matters, including Jake's twenty-sixth birthday. Besides expressing eagerness for the spring vacation time they planned to spend together, they hardly discussed their relationship.

On the Friday school was out, Jake spent the late afternoon cleaning, servicing and packing his truck, wondering how Tina would react when she got her first gander at Loretta, his 1960 Volkswagen dual-cab pickup with a custom snap-on black tarp over the back.

When Loretta was clean, "she" was a shiny, deep forest green with white trim, the colors Jake chose over the original faded tan. To him, the truck was both a fun and practical vehicle—you could haul five people, two next to the driver and three more in back, with all your gear secured behind. He was convinced Loretta's venerable little engine would run forever if he followed his mechanic's decree to change the oil and adjust the valves more often than did most owners.

Because of the truck's lack of power on even the slightest incline, Jake had learned to leave early when driving to out-of-town destinations. He named Loretta for a Beatles lyric he was listening to one day while going thirty up a grade from L.A. to Mount Wilson, traffic lining up behind him. He yelled, "Get back, Loretta," and moved to the side of the road to watch everyone go by.

Since Tina didn't expect him until Monday evening, Jake planned to take a leisurely drive up the coast, camp at night, and meet her in San Francisco after she spent the weekend with her mother in nearby Sequoia City. Tina had given him a vague explanation that Mrs. Linn's "status with the church" had changed, causing her recent move from Redding to the Bay Area. Neither Jake nor Tina knew San Francisco very well, so he made reservations to spend three nights there; they planned to be tourists during the day.

He left Orange County before ten on Saturday morning and didn't finish with the freeways until after Ventura. Heading for Santa Barbara, he observed

that the coastline, as in San Diego, was succumbing to development. Jake cleared Santa Barbara and most of the traffic around three o'clock, listening to his eight-track player. When Randy Newman's raspy voice finished *God's Song*, he played it again, wondering how Tina would react to the cynical Lord in Randy's lyrics.

He stopped in Solvang, one of his parents' favorite destinations. They took him there twice for the Danish festivals; Jake especially remembered eating *Aebelkskiver*, a sort of handball-sized pancake the locals cooked and sold right in the streets. He found some of the Danish treats at a small café and ordered some for an early dinner.

Jake then took Highway 1, known by long-time Californians as "the old coast road." He was surprised to find mile after mile of pristine beaches until he checked the map and realized he was driving through land controlled by the Air Force for ballistic missile sites. He watched the sun set over the Pacific, decided not to camp, and drove to Santa María to stay the night in a cheap motel.

Up early Sunday morning, he settled for coffee, a roll and an apple as he set out for Highway 1 again. He didn't get far before he came to a sign for the San Luis Obispo mission, recalling how he hadn't paid much attention to the old Franciscan outpost when he was there once with his parents. Jake drove to the mission; this time he read the historical displays before buying a book about Junípero Serra in the nearby town.

He continued up to Morro Bay and stopped at a small grocery to purchase a light "sperm picnic," smiling to himself about Tina's laughing fit in the cab in San Diego. Deciding not to eat off his lap again, he found the nearby state park, put on his coat and ate at a picnic table. He had seen the Morro Bay rock before, but this day the volcanic plug protruded above low-lying fog in the bay like a monolithic shark fin moving through a grey ocean. After eating, he spent a relaxing half hour watching seals and shorebirds through his binoculars.

On Highway 1 again, Jake looked back at the partially cloaked rock until it was out of sight. He disinterestedly passed road signs for the Hearst Castle and enjoyed the twisting ride by picturesque rocky shores, stopping once to beach comb and fool around near the waves, which also reminded him of Tina. At Big Sur, he spent the late afternoon hiking the beach trails before camping that night at the state park. He drank two "tall boys" from a six-pack and slept well to the sound of the steady breakers.

Jake arrived in Monterey Monday morning with several ideas on his mind. He was enjoying the trip more than he expected, and he knew why. Besides the anticipation of seeing Tina that evening, each experience on the journey

made him wonder how she would respond if she had been with him. Jake decided to call her midday instead of waiting until he was almost there.

He had only been in Monterey as a child; his notion now was to dedicate the rest of the morning to his favorite writer. In Jake's opinion, John Steinbeck was unjustly eulogized as the author of one of his more trivial works, *Travels with Charlie*. Jake would honor the writer by attempting to visit some of the places that contributed to the vivid settings in his novels.

He decided to take a short drive to Salinas first, where he lost himself for an hour in the Steinbeck library before returning to Monterey. Jake found the cannery district and was surprised how the mostly abandoned factories and grey warehouses still resembled the images he remembered from *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*.

Walking around the neighborhood, Jake came to a small bookstore where he bought the paperback, *In Dubious Battle*, a short Steinbeck novel he had not read. At a "head shop" next door, he entered through some beaded curtains actually made of caps from beer and soda bottles.

Inside, a bearded man with a blond Afro and a tie-dyed shirt stood by an Earth Day poster. At first doubting the man's radical credibility, Jake inspected the wares and discovered they were mostly crafted from recycled or natural materials. He inquired about the curtains, thinking they would make a cool boundary for his classroom reading area. The clerk, also the owner, said they were easy to put together, demonstrating with some pliers by squeezing two caps onto a shoelace. Jake decided to start saving bottle caps to make his own curtain.

Finding that much of the inventory came from co-ops, Jake bought a small hand-woven Native American basket for Tina. As the owner made change, he wanted to know if the "outsight green truck" was for sale. Jake told him it wasn't, but they chatted about Volkswagens for a while. On his way out, Jake asked where the nearest pay phone was. The man said he was welcome to use the store phone for a local call, or get time and charges.

The proprietor showed him the way through more bottle cap curtains into a small back room, where Jake sat by the phone. He dialed the operator; she went ahead and placed his call to Sequoia City. *Man, I hope Tina answers, not her mother.*

"Six-six-four-oh-oh-one-four." The voice was even crabbier than Jake expected.

Polite, Jake. "Hello, uh, Mrs. Linn, I'm a friend of Tina's, my—"

"I'm sorry, Christina is not available now."

Jesus. "I see. Can you tell me when I might be able to talk to her?"

“No, I can’t. Please call back in a few days.”

No way. “Ma’am, she and I have, uh, an appointment this evening. Not exactly an appointment—”

“I’m afraid it will have to be postponed. Christina is recovering from a medical emergency.”

“What? What kind of emergency? Is she okay?”

“She’s recuperating, but it will be two or three days before she’s on her feet. As I said, you can call then.”

Bull. “Excuse me, Mrs. Linn, I think she’ll want to talk to me before that.”

“Your name?”

“Jake Friend.”

“That’s really your name?”

Afraid so, lady. “Yes, you can’t tell me what’s wrong with her?”

“No, but I’ve decided to tell her you called.”

Thanks a million. “I don’t mean to be pushy, but please tell her I’ll call again in the morning around ten, if that’s a good time.”

“If she indeed wishes to speak to you, that would probably work. Good afternoon.”

“Ma’am, uh, Tina’s condi—” The phone was dead. “I’ll be damned.” Jake stayed in the chair a moment, his mind racing. He got up, took out his wallet and swept his way through the clicking bottle caps, a five-dollar bill in his hand. He put the money on the counter, called out his thanks and hurried to the truck.

Though he knew he couldn’t do anything about Tina until the next morning, Jake took U.S. 101 and headed toward San Francisco as fast as Loretta would take him. On one down slope, he got her over sixty-five; Loretta rebelled with rattles and vibrations Jake had never heard before, so he slowed to sixty.

Debating with himself all possible reasons for Tina’s illness, he passed San Jose, drove up the west side of San Francisco Bay and approached Sequoia City around three o’clock. Perturbed by the town’s audacity to use *sequoia* in its name, the place reminded him of freeway blight in Los Angeles. Each neighborhood was a middle-class parody of the last, interspersed with blocks of drab warehouses and factories.

He found a chain motel named for the seven bucks a night it cost to stay there years before. Jake paid for one night and took a few of his things into the small, chintzy room, thinking about Tina and what he would do if her mother kept them apart.

Not sure what to do with himself, he put on his jacket and Cubs cap, went out into the cool, cloudy afternoon and walked several blocks to a convenience

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

store. He bought a Bay Area map and a newspaper and was halfway back when hot grease molecules found their way into his nostrils. The source was a corner Chinese restaurant; he entered and ordered some prawns and fried rice. While he waited, Jake drank a beer and found Mrs. Linn's street on the map. He thought about driving by but decided that would be a creepy thing to do. Jake had another beer with his bland food, which wasn't as greasy as it smelled, and satisfying for no other reason than it was warm.

Back at the room, he put his first two found bottle caps on the end table and then tried to distract his rambling, worrisome thoughts about Tina. After reading in the Chronicle about Nixon's boys going to jail and the Giants' spring training woes, he picked up the Steinbeck novella but couldn't seem to get started. He went out to the truck and brought in the rest of his six-pack. Jake turned on the TV and went through the channels, staying with an *All in the Family* rerun. Sipping from one of the tall cans, he lowered the volume and let a gangster movie with spraying bullets, stilted dialogue, and car chases occupy his next couple of hours. He barely paid attention as he finished off the last can of tepid beer and finally went to sleep.

8

Jake slept through the wind-up alarm. He opened his eyes an hour later, disoriented by the orange, white and light brown paint once slathered onto every surface of the Seven Days Motel. His alarm clock had stopped; he turned to the electric one on the end table. *Geez, after nine; get yourself together and call Tina—damn, what a headache. Too many beers, Einstein.*

After he took an aspirin and a slow, warm shower, Jake shaved his neck, gave his beard a quick trim, and put on a blue long-sleeve denim shirt and black jeans. When he finished putting things away, it was five after ten.

The phone to his ear, Jake sat on the bed, got an outside line and dialed. *This should be fun. Polite—if you want to get past the ol' crab.*

“Hello?”

Thank God. “Tina, how are you?”

“*Estoy bien,*” she said quietly, sounding furtive.

Why the Spanish? “Your mother said it was an emergency—I’ve been going nuts—she wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“*She exaggerated. She is here, very close. Momento.*”

“I was expecting her to answer.”

“*She is leaving now.*” Her voice was still subdued until she changed to English. “Bye, Mom.” She paused. “There, she’s gone—sorry.”

“Tina, what happened to you?”

“I’m okay now, Jake. It’s, uh, kind of difficult to talk about.”

Like female difficult? Easy, could be anything—a rash, bowels...”

“You there, Jake?”

“Yes, sorry.”

“Where did you stay last night?”

He heard her sniff away from the phone. *Is she upset?* “I’m at a motel, a mile or so away. You sure you’re all right?”

“Yes. I’ll be ready for school next week.”

"That soon?"

"I didn't really need to go to emergency." She paused again; he didn't hear any more signs of crying. "But that place did bother me a little."

Jake waited to see if she would explain.

"I haven't been in a hospital for myself," she said, "since I had malaria."

"You had malaria?"

"When I was little. They just put me in there to rest."

What if this was female problems? He could hear Tina sigh. *Good God, a miscarriage? Calm down, you don't know that.*

"Jake?"

"Yeah, uh, I'm sorry you had to go through it, whatever it was."

"Can you come over here tomorrow? I'd rather talk about it then."

"Sure, Tina. Can I see you that soon?"

"Yes, I've been resting for two days."

"What about your mother? I didn't get off to a good start with her."

"She's speaking at a church luncheon tomorrow in Palo Alto. We can work around her; it's probably not a good time to meet her, anyway. Jake, how was your trip?"

Quick change of subject. He briefly mentioned the beaches and Steinbeck country. "I'll tell you the fascinating details tomorrow, if you want. When do you think I should come by?"

"How about late morning?"

"That's fine."

"Jake, I'm sorry this ruined our plans."

"It doesn't matter."

"You could just head back after I see you. Then maybe we can meet on some weekend."

"If that's what's best for you, but I'd rather wait and then spend more time—if you're up to it."

"I'm ready to get out of here for a while."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I need a rest from all my resting."

"I have an idea. When I cancel our reservation for tonight, I can keep the room for Wednesday and Thursday. You could rest there; we could talk, play cards or something, get room service or I could go out and get us, uh, one of my famous picnics. We could just hang out and relax." *You're pleading, Jake.*

"That sounds so fun."

"Uh, great, but we'll see how you're feeling tomorrow." He thought he heard her sob. *Damn.* "Tina?"

“Yes.”

“Did I upset you?”

“No, it’s my ol’ waterworks again. I just appreciate how nice you’re being about all this.” She made a long, draining exhale. “*Bastante*, no more crying.”

“Siesta time, maybe?”

“Probably so.”

“What’s your mother going to say if you leave for a couple days?”

“After I’m in bed all day today, she won’t bother me; she’s finally resigned that I make my own decisions.”

“I’d rather not chit-chat with her on the phone, so let’s set a time. Is eleven too early?”

“Just right, she’ll be gone by then. What will you do today, Jake?”

“Touristy stuff, I guess. Can’t wait to see you, Latina.” *Ugh, corny.*

“*Sí, yo también.*”

Man, that sounds so good. “Uh, I’ll let you rest. In case something comes up, I’m at the Seven Days, room one ten.”

“Got it. Thanks, Jake—*mañana, a las once.*”

“*Cierto que sí. Adiós, Latina.*”

He hung up and stretched back on the bed. *She was more upset than she showed.* Jake looked up at the soundproofing holes in the ceiling. *My God, if it was a miscarriage, it would’ve been ours. Of course, you schmuck.* He got up and walked into the bathroom.

How would you deal with it, if she were pregnant? He saw his mellow smile in the mirror. *Yes, it would be good, very good. Jesus, what matters now is if she’s okay.*

Over the next twenty-four hours, Jake worried about Tina, constantly at times, although he figured out plenty to do. First, he shook himself from his introspection to find the local map. Jake studied it on his way out to the motel office, where he paid for another night. He came back to the room and phoned the hotel to change their reservations.

Jake had two places on his itinerary for the day—Candlestick Park, the home of the hapless Giants; and then he was going to check out what was going on at Haight-Ashbury and look for something Tina might like.

With his girlfriend not far from his mind, Jake drove up Highway 101 through San Mateo into South San Francisco along one of the oldest stretches of freeway in California, his map claimed.

Dubious distinction. Jake decided to get off at the next exit, where he stopped and glowered at a stretch of tidelands littered with plastic, old tires and rusted metal, the rocks frothy with dun-colored foam.

He returned to the freeway, found his turnoff, drove past more tideland, not as polluted, and then by scrubby undeveloped hilly ground on the way out to Candlestick Park. At a forlorn parking lot, he climbed down from Loretta, zipped up his windbreaker and pulled over the hood. It felt to him like it might be as blustery as that day, years before, when a Giants pitcher was blown off the mound during the All-Star Game and charged with a balk.

Jake looked out at the sullen bay and wondered how it could be so foggy and breezy at the same time. He turned to the massive, austere stadium. A few years before, they tried to close in the structure—a futile attempt to cut off the swirling wind for the new football tenants. The place looked ordinary to Jake, like a fat egg, especially compared to Wrigley Field, Yankee Stadium, and Fenway—the *real* ballparks he visited on his trips to and from Costa Rica. Candlestick was locked and nearly deserted now, save a half-dozen vehicles for staff who were probably sprucing up the place for baseball. A 49ers billboard still promoted a season that was long over.

Stupid football. He drove into the Candlestick Point Recreation Area and from the front seat looked out at the gusty bay through his binoculars. Other than some suburbs in the distance, the tidelands here were nearly pristine; he watched what he guessed were cormorants taking off from the rocks and diving for fish. A kayaker in a wet suit came into his view; Jake put down the binoculars and stared at the determined man, paddling by the small sandy beach. After the kayak glided away, Jake started back to town.

He wanted a bite to eat, but there wasn't even a mini-mart before 101, so Jake got back on the freeway and took the second exit into the city. He found a hot dog stand and ordered a foot-long with the works, chatting with the lonely proprietor, who commented on Jake's Cubs cap. For a half hour or so, they talked about Candlestick, debated the batting statistics of Willie Mays and Ernie Banks, and compared the bleak prospects for both the Giants and Cubs in the coming season.

Before one o'clock, Jake backed Loretta's front wheels down to a curb in a steep residential neighborhood. He zipped up his jacket, checked the street sign, then hoofed his way around, finding plenty of exercise on the city's famed hills. He was impressed that so many of the older homes had been remodeled without violating the original architecture, an approach he hadn't seen much in L.A.

Closer to the city center, Jake found a few blocks of inactive old warehouses and office buildings, reminding him of the post-apocalyptic San Francisco in *On the Beach*. He came to a more active artery where a trolley passed by, rumbling and squeaking, only a half dozen people on the seats, bundled up against the cold.

He followed the trolley tracks into the skyscrapers and watched downcast white-collar workers on the streets hurrying back from lunch. After Jake checked his map, he walked almost another half hour before he found the corner of Haight and Ashbury. The iconic intersection was formed by several old refurbished buildings, each one three squat stories of Victorian architecture, he guessed, lacy and ornate. The upstairs of the side-by-side edifices appeared to be apartments, with storefronts on the bottom floors.

The area was mostly lifeless. Many of the shops were closed or abandoned, and there were no “colorful hippies” in sight, just a few ordinary people as well as a handful of the city’s destitute, living out the day on the street. Other than political graffiti here and there and layers of stapled neon-bright posters on telephone poles, Jake thought he could just as well have been on a rundown stretch of Pico Boulevard in L.A. He walked three more blocks and spotted new construction ahead, unmistakably a convenience store or a fast-food joint.

He turned back toward the heart of the “Haight” and found an open boutique. Jake entered the shop and focused right in on a white peasant blouse from Mexico, embroidered in blue and yellow flowers with dark green stems. With that purchase under his arm in a recycled grocery bag, Jake poked around the neighborhood, thinking that the local merchants had an identity crisis. They were having trouble figuring out how to merchandise the so-called counterculture without abandoning it.

Around five o’clock, Jake started back downtown, feeling hungry. He found a taxi, got in and asked the driver about fish and chips. The man assumed he wanted Fisherman’s Wharf, but Jake said he just wanted a place nearby. The cabby found a stand and waited for Jake to purchase his deep-fried repast before driving him to a convenience store. Jake bought a six-pack of beer, bottles this time, and rode the few miles in moderate traffic back to the truck.

He climbed into Loretta, felt a pinch in his jeans and emptied some bottle caps he found onto the seat. Jake opened a beer with his pocketknife, saved the cap, and took a long drink. Sitting back, he looked down through a foggy dusk at the settling city. Wondering what Tina was doing, Jake began to ponder the ramifications if she had indeed miscarried. He considered how difficult it would have been for her to go through something like that alone, her mother probably not much help. Jake felt pressure around his eyes but held off any tears. By the time he bit into a piece of fish, it was cold.

9

Back at the motel after his late night and busy day, Jake watched a TV report on the startup of the Alaska pipeline, scoffing at their predictions for minimal impact on the environment. He read the first chapters of *In Dubious Battle* and was comfortably involved for a while in the Depression-era fruit pickers' revolt in the San Joaquin Valley. Thirsty, Jake started out to Loretta to get the six-pack. *And get shit-faced again?* Instead, he bought a diet cola from the motel's pop machine, went back to his book and finally nodded off before midnight.

He woke the next morning before eight, disappointed that it wasn't time to go, so he lolled in bed and read more chapters of the novel. Just after nine, the phone startled him from his reading.

"Yes?"

"Morning, Jake."

"Latina." He did a fair job of containing his enthusiasm. "Good morning yourself."

"You sleep well?"

"Yeah, okay, how about you? How are you feeling?"

"After all this rest, like nothing happened. Jake, just come over when you want; Mom left early on an errand."

"Okay, let's go out for breakfast."

"Yum, I am finally feeling hungry."

"Great. You know a place nearby?"

"There's a couple. You're a ways from here; do you know where Redwood Street is?"

"Yup, found it on my Frisco map."

Tina chuckled a little. "You were right about Frisco, they don't say it up here. See you soon?"

"I'll get together and come over—*una media hora, más o menos.*"

“*Está bien*. Bye, Jake.”

“Bye, half an hour.” *You just said that, klutz*. He threw back the covers and rushed into the bathroom to handle the bare minimum. He stumbled back into the room, stepping into the jeans he had hung on the door the night before with the denim shirt. Jake realized he forgot to brush his teeth; he went back to do that and apply some deodorant. Putting on his shirt, Cubs cap and wind-breaker, Jake scrambled outside, vaguely aware that it was another overcast day.

He started the engine and idled it when something else dawned on him. Jake dashed back to the room, dropping the key twice before he made it in to find Tina’s gifts. Cursing his clumsiness, he brought two sacks out to Loretta’s back seat. Though it was after morning rush hour, the traffic was heavy as he finally drove off.

Jake found Redwood Street, which was mostly apartments; he started counting down the addresses. He spotted 1317 at the end of two off-white stucco duplexes, a straw colored lawn out front. At the center of the otherwise empty yard, a ten-foot pine with brown needles drooped off to one side.

The parking places for the duplexes were taken, so Jake pulled in by a Chevy next door at one of the only regular houses on the block. He got out and walked down the sidewalk to a narrow paved path that bisected the dry lawn in front of 1317 and 1319.

You’re actually going to see her; don’t mess it up. Jake walked by the pine, noticing that someone had hung homemade paper Easter eggs on the ailing tree. He climbed the three steps and pressed the buzzer; Tina came right away to the door in jeans, a blue KENTUCKY sweatshirt and white sneakers. She seemed serious to him, which wasn’t unusual, but she did look pale.

She still looks great. Tina opened the door to let him in, her hair opalescent, though there was no direct sunlight. “Hey, Tina,” he said. They embraced but neither of them spoke or moved for a kiss. They finally released and stepped inside, still holding hands. She let go to shut the front door to the cold day, then turned back to him.

“Tina, it’s probably the wrong thing to say when you feel so crappy, but, uh, you look really good.”

“Thank you, Jake. I’m okay, really.”

He took both of her hands. “I missed you, Latina.”

She squeezed his fingers. “And I missed you, *Don Joaquín*.”

“What?”

“Well, you gave *me* a name.” A spark of a grin showed on her face. “You told me you were no Don Juan, so now you’re *el caballero*, *Don Joaquín*. That’s as close as we’ll get to *Jake*.” As quickly as she had smiled, Tina turned

serious, releasing his hands. "Jake, do you mind if we just leave? I really want to get out of here."

"Pues, vámanos."

"I'll get my coat." Tina went to a hall closet; Jake looked around the small living room and dining area, both painted a flat yellow. It all looked sparse to him: a couple of end tables, TV, and a matching couch with easy chair; all of it of bland design, like rental furniture. Above the sofa, an expensively framed print of the Last Supper was the only decor. A round dining room table—her mother's work station—was cluttered with the phone, a manual typewriter, a crank calculator, and lots of mail, scattered between faltering piles of bibles and other books.

Tina came back, wrapping herself in a bulky dark blue down parka. "Something wrong, Jake?"

"No, I just expected your mother would, uh, I don't know, seem more established."

"I probably didn't explain that this is temporary. She decided to come out of retirement; Mom goes back to Africa in May."

Good. "Is that right?" He turned toward a *yip* he heard from the back yard. "Your mom's dog?"

"No, that's *Fiera*; she's mine."

"What? You didn't tell me you had a dog."

"I'm afraid she isn't much to brag about."

"Fiera the beast? I've gotta see this."

"Fair warning, her name fits."

Tina went to the back door, was gone a minute, and then returned with the dog on a leash, almost pulling her over. Fiera, her tongue hanging out, strained the line to greet Jake, who quickly sized up the mutt. Sorrel brown without any obvious markings, she had the length and height of a full-grown Basset but was more slender like a beagle, and unlike any hound he knew, she had pointy ears.

"¿Es mala?" he asked.

"No, hardly."

"Okay, let her go."

As soon as Tina released Fiera, the dog lunged to Jake, who stooped to roughhouse her ears. Fiera licked him wherever she could; her ears somehow relaxed and turned floppy.

"Oh, isn't *that* something, she actually *likes* you," Tina said, her tone wry.

Jake was taken aback a moment by her sarcasm. "In other words, she does this with everybody." He started to stand, but Fiera kept slobbering.

“Afraid so. C’mon, pooch.” The dog went to her after a second call; Tina picked up the leash, canine tongue all over her hand. She ruffled Fiera’s ears, then pulled her; but the sinewy mutt tugged hard the other way, escaped, and sprinted back to Jake, her claws scraping on the linoleum.

“Sorry, Jake; she’s so strong. Probably best if you escort us back out. She’ll think it’s a walk.”

They led the dog through the small kitchen and out the back door into a narrow yard, which was secured all the way around with five-foot chain-link. Tina tied her up; Fiera began yipping as they left.

“Why do you have to tie her up?”

“Believe it or not, she can get out of there—if not over the fence, then under it. I don’t think any yard can hold her; the vet told me that’s pretty typical of hounds, even mixed ones. He thought she would mellow after she was spayed—no such luck. If we don’t turn back, she’ll settle down.” After entering the kitchen, they stopped to listen; the dog had stopped whining.

“She’s a hound mixed with what?”

“Who knows? I got her from some kids outside of a market in Visalia last year. ‘Wanna real Germanshepper, lady? Only five bucks.’ She was so adorable, I didn’t care what she was.”

They left the kitchen. “Hold on a sec, Jake.” Tina went into another room and came right back. “This is for you. Happy belated birthday.” She handed him a rectangular shirt box wrapped in white tissue and blue ribbon. “Open it after we leave, okay?”

“Thanks. I have something from the trip for you—not wrapped, though.”

“So? We’ll have a little party.” Tina didn’t sound very enthused by her own suggestion.

Trying hard to be cheerful. “Tina, how did you get the dog over here?” They started for the door.

“Beth, my roommate, bless her heart; she packed us all into her new Mustang.”

“New? I thought she worked for the State.”

“She’s a big shot administrator.” Tina took out a key from the same beaded hand purse Jake remembered from San Diego. “It’ll be nice to have Mom’s car when she goes back to Africa.”

“Right. Where’s your Cameroon bag?”

“Oh, it’s here, full of stuff, as usual.” They went out, she locked the door, and Jake offered his free arm. “Thanks,” she said, taking his elbow. “Guess I am a bit shaky from lying around.” They stepped down and started on the path, but Tina tugged him to a stop. “Which car is yours, Jake?”

“Right there.” He pointed to Loretta.

“The green one?” Her voice sounded slightly critical until they got closer. “It’s a Volkswagen. I never saw one like this.”

“You don’t see ’em a lot.” They half-circled Loretta; he told her a little about the truck. “You don’t mind being seen in it, Ms. Linn?” he asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Are you kidding? It’s very cute.”

The girl’s too much. He opened the passenger side front door. “Okay, Loretta, you passed the test so far.” Jake turned to Tina. “Ma-dam.” With exaggerated chivalry, he swept his arm toward the seat, then lifted her elbow.

“Gracias, Don Joaquín,” she said, attempting a grin.

He put the gift box by her, closed the door, hurried around to the other side and got in, noticing that she had found the middle lap belt and put his binoculars over by the present. Jake clamped his belt and settled in by her, imagining he could feel Tina’s warmth through her thick coat. He turned the ignition key. *This is good, very good.*

“Jake, I think I’m jealous of Loretta; she’s so pretty, and starts right up,” she joked with a half smile. “Tell me about her name.” Jake drove off and told her the Beatles story; she gave directions to the diner and asked him to recite all the lines he could remember from *Get Back*. Jake laughed as she made deadpan comments on how each lyric did or did not fit him.

“Maybe you should be Jo-Jo instead of Don Joaquín,” she said.

He chuckled again. *She’s feeling better.*

Since Jake had the song on tape, she insisted that he play it for her after breakfast. They arrived at the Sequoia Waffle House, parked, and started in. Jake leaned over and picked up a bottle cap off the ground.

“All right, that’s about a dozen,” he said. Tina wrinkled her fair brows as he put it in his pocket. Jake took her hand. “Just a beer cap. I’ll explain later.”

Tina ordered coffee, fresh orange juice and an omelet; Jake added a side of pancakes to the same meal. They chatted about Fiera, then Tina asked about his “Frisco” excursion.

As they ate, he described his hiking tour of the city. “...I found you a new hippie item from Haight-Ashbury; it’s not as good as a gabán.”

“Well, thank you.” Tina put her fork down by the half-eaten large omelet. “Orie will be envious,” she added.

“Right, but this is something she might like. Can I order something else for you, Tina?”

“No thanks; I’m stuffed.” She frowned at her plate. “Jake, I can’t just leave this.”

“Uh, okay, I’ll ask for a box.” It was a small thing, but Jake, who never had leftovers at a restaurant, was impressed by Tina’s resolve. While he craned his neck to find the waitress, he saw a vacated table nearby with enough potatoes, pancakes and bacon to feed a hungry adult. If not for Tina, he wouldn’t have even noticed the waste.

They left the restaurant, Jake holding a paper sack with the small carton inside. They got into the truck, and Tina told him she felt good, suggesting a ride somewhere. Jake said he knew “just the place,” where she could see the bay. They started out and, as promised, he put the Beatles and *Get Back* on the eight-track.

“Get back, Loretta,” he said, then retraced the streets and freeways to return to Candlestick Point. Jake turned off the tape after he exited 101, where he saw someone walking near the bay, all bundled up. Tina had already zipped up her coat; Jake realized it was even colder and no less windy than the day before.

He headed out for the “Stick,” cranking the heat up to maximum. Loretta’s feeble heater, never a problem around L.A., now made Jake grumble as he pulled repeatedly at the vent flap.

“Something wrong, Jake?”

“This heater isn’t worth crap.”

“I have my big coat; I’m fine.”

“What about your feet?”

“They’re a little cold. I’ll live.”

“I can get my sleeping bag for your feet, or maybe I should just take you back.”

“No. We don’t turn around unless we absolutely have to. Remember?”

He chuckled. “We don’t, huh?”

“Yes, I want to see this place.”

“Okay, if you promise to stay out of the water.”

She made a slight smile. “Deal,” she said, then scanned the foggy tidelands, serious again. At the ballpark, Jake pulled over, the engine idling.

“This stadium looks so strange out here,” she said.

“Especially the way they closed it in for football. Not much of a ballpark anymore.”

“You look disgusted.”

“Yeah; but I can tell you something cool about this place you’re not going to believe.” He put Loretta in gear and drove off, telling Tina about the guy he met at the hot dog stand. “Get this, he said the Beatles’ last concert *ever* was right here at Candlestick in sixty-six.”

"You're kidding."

"No, he even had the article."

"Well, get back, Loretta—that is something."

Jake laughed again, then drove on out to the Point and parked at the shore. A storm threatened in the bay, the fog churning up into leaden clouds. The birds were fishing again, and two beachcombers in layers of clothing leaned forward, inching along over the sand and rocks.

"My gosh, look at those birds dive," she said.

He reached around Tina for the binoculars and gave them to her. "I think they're cormorants." He watched her focus intently on them.

"They're so graceful—just beautiful."

You're beautiful. Don't say that, sap. "Yeah. How are your feet?"

"Freezing. Maybe I will take that sleeping bag."

While she kept watching the birds, Jake got out into a stiff wind, zipped up his jacket and pulled over the thin hood. At the truck bed, he unsnapped a corner, extracted the sleeping bag, and then re-secured the tarp. The wind's relentless chill made him hustle back into the cab. Tina unbuckled her seatbelt, zipped the bag down, and held it open.

"Put your feet in, Jake."

He shivered a little. "Just like ol' times?"

"Not quite. C'mon."

After fiddling with the bag and zipper, they intertwined their lower extremities in the downy cocoon; Jake put his arm around her.

Yeah, much better. Cálmate. "The guy at the stand told me the Point is named after a bird like a sandpiper. They don't nest around here anymore because of the development." He paused, looking in the direction of the mist-shrouded suburbs. "They should save more land, or someday it'll just be this park and the stadium."

"Imagine how wild this was a hundred years ago."

He nodded, and they scissored their legs together for more warmth, watching the turbulent bay close in like a slate curtain. As sprinkles dotted the truck's windshield, the beachcombers looked at the sky and began to wander away.

"This does remind me of your gabán—almost as warm," Jake said. "What happened to it?"

"Shrunk. I made it into a throw for my couch."

"You did?" *Are you going to ask what you really want to know?*

Tina reached for the gift box; she put it in his lap. "Okay, good timing; you need this."

"I get to go first?"

“Yes, please open it.”

Jake brought his arm down and pulled the ribbon and thin paper from the white box. He removed the cover to reveal a grinning bear cub logo and CHICAGO in red letters over blue muslin.

Tina watched his face brighten. “The man said it’s heavily lined for the Windy City. Look under it.”

He found a Cubs stocking cap. “Thanks, Tina; how did you get this stuff so fast?”

“It seems there are a lot of Cubs fans; it wasn’t that hard. Put them on, Jake.”

“This is just great.” He put the coat on over the windbreaker, zipped up, tossed his hat behind, and then pulled the stocking cap down over his ears.

“Good, it all fits, and we certainly know which team is yours.”

“Yeah, I think it’s also a not-so-subtle message that when I take you somewhere I freeze my butt off.”

“Well, maybe a little.”

“Now you.” He turned around, extracting his legs from the bag and lunging halfway over the seat for the small white sack and grocery bag. He brought the gifts up front, stuffed his legs back in by hers and tightly rolled up the paper sacks. “Pretty fancy wrapping job, huh?” He handed her the small white bag.

She returned one of her pleasant smiles. “Opening is opening.” Tina unrolled the top, lifted out the woven grass basket, and carefully inspected it. She silently read the artisan’s card. “A lady from one of the coastal tribes made this—the workmanship is amazing. Where did you find it, Jake?”

He told her about the head shop, including an explanation of why he picked up the bottle cap earlier.

“You’re going to make your own beaded curtain?”

“If I find enough bottle caps.”

“Oh, you will. I love the basket, Jake, but you didn’t need to get me two things.”

He touched his new hat. “You did.” Jake handed her the grocery bag. “C’mon, Latina, open it, *ábrelo*.”

She unrolled it slowly, raising both eyebrows as if a great mystery awaited her. Tina took out the blouse and held it up. “Glory, this is hand embroidered. It’s so tasteful, Jake. I have to put it on.”

“Right now?”

“Well, you got to put on your jacket.” Tina scooted away a few inches, still in the sleeping bag, and retracted her arms inside the big coat. She turned

it backwards and pushed it up over her head, an elbow jabbing Jake softly. A muffled “Sorry” came from inside the bouncing coat. Her bare arm darted out, flinging the sweatshirt in back and snatching up the peasant blouse next to her, all in one motion.

“Man, let me know if there’s anything I can do to help out under there,” he said.

“Don’t be naughty now.” Tina’s face surfaced, her long hair somehow falling almost back into place. She tucked and jostled, then let the coat fall to her lap, holding out her arms. “Ta-da!”

Jake knew he was right to choose a modest blouse that came up to her neck, but when he saw how nicely she filled the white bodice, he felt himself harden. *Cool it, for God’s sake.* “It looks great on you.”

“Thank you, Jake, so much. It fits just right. How did you know the size?”

“Lucky guess. C’mon, you’ll get cold.” He lifted the coat to cover her; she moved it back over both of them; they hugged tightly.

Tina retracted her head a little, looking right at him. “Guess what?” she said, not really asking. “You have orange pulp—*en tu bigote.*”

“Hm?” He raked his moustache with his lower lip.

“Nope, you didn’t get it. Guess I’ll have to kiss it off of there.”

“Now who’s being naughty?”

“Isn’t naughty.” She pecked him below his nose.

“Oh yeah? You have some egg—*en tu barba.*” He returned a quick buss to her chin; they chuckled and fell into a long kiss. Still embracing, Tina and Jake turned their heads to the bay; only the thick clouds and the closest stretch of beach remained visible.

Perfect. For you, maybe—what about her? He released an arm so he could see her. “Are you sure you’re okay, not cold anywhere?”

“No. And I feel much better, thanks to you. Only one thing we forgot—molasses cookies,” she said, now with an easy grin.

He smiled. *You could ruin the whole day if you ask about it.*

“Jake, you have that telling eyebrow up again.”

He moved slightly away. *Go on.* “Yeah. I was thinking about asking you what happened.”

“I’d be surprised if you didn’t.” She took his free hand. “I’m sorry; I’ve been stalling.”

“No, you asked for a day; we can wait longer if you want. What matters most is that you’re okay, Tina.”

“That’s very sweet; always the caballero, Don Joaquín.” Moisture welled in her eyes as they met his. “Jake, you probably already guessed I was . . .”

She paused, lowering her chin. “Uh, late for my period—I’m never late—clockwork.” She looked at him. “They said it was probably a miscarriage, but they weren’t completely sure.”

“And you really are all right?”

“Physically, I’m fine.” She sighed deeply. “I almost told you on the phone, but you know how I sometimes avoid dealing with things.” Tears launched from her eyes, slaloming down both sides of her face. After she dabbed her cheek with a tissue from the purse, he held her for a few moments. “I’m finished crying,” Tina said, biting her lower lip.

Jake let go with his outer arm and smiled at her. “It’s just your ol’ waterworks opening a little.”

“That’s right.” She made a long sniff. “Thank you, Jake.” They hugged again, watching the drizzle turn to a steady rain, streaking the windshield. The interior glass fogged up; he wedged open the wind wing before putting his arm back around her; she held his other hand.

“Jake, I’ve been trying to deal with some guilt.”

“Your mother seems pretty good at dishing that out.”

“Not over this. I told her it was just ‘lady problems.’ Even if she suspects I was pregnant, I could fly to Mars before she would talk about it. She’d just stick to her script and pretend it didn’t happen.”

He saw a single tear bulge then escape from the canthus of her left eye. “Tina, I know we should talk about this, but we can give it a rest for a while if you want.”

“No. If I could just stop bawling.” Trying to regain composure, she blew her nose lightly in the tissue. “When I was late, I was worried you might think I trapped you.”

Jake scoffed. “That’d be some conquest, like you said at the beach.”

She thought for a moment. “And I remember what you said—‘To hell with that.’”

He grinned at her adamant tone. “Okay, we’re even.”

Tina looked down at her hands. “Another thing that bothered me—I thought I must have done something wrong to, uh, cause the miscarriage.”

“Of course you didn’t.”

“I guess I know that now.”

Jake watched her stare solemnly at the rain. “Tina, I have to admit that yesterday, after I thought you might’ve been pregnant, it freaked me out some.”

“Yes. We should’ve been more careful.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He shook his head. “Let me start over.”

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

"Jake, you won't say anything wrong."

"Yeah, we'll see." He sighed. "When I thought about just the possibility of, uh, us having a baby, the truth is, uh, it . . ." *Say it, klutz.* "It felt right."

She moved into his arms, looking up at him, her eyes puffy. "For me, too, Jake," Tina said around a sob; he embraced her again.

She drew another long sniff through her sinuses and gently pulled his arm down. "Jake, even after they said they weren't sure, I had this uncontrollable wave of sadness at the hospital."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could have been there with you."

She tried to smile and opened her hand, revealing only a soggy little white ball. "That was my last tissue; I'll just have to stop blubbing."

Jake found some napkins in the glove compartment; she wiped her eyes, then exhaled loudly, almost like blowing out candles. "Anyway, I was so upset I made the mistake of telling the emergency doctor how I felt. He told me to relax, that it was probably just 'a normal, very early, spontaneous abortion.'"

"Just like that? Jesus, it's good to get the facts, but that's sounds pretty cold."

"Yes, he was impersonal, but that's okay."

"I don't think so—sounds like a putz to me."

She dabbed her face again. "A what?"

"Another Yiddish word—a *jerk*," he said, irritated and serious.

Tina snickered a little.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Dad and Jimmy stood up for me like that sometimes. I'm a big girl, Jake, but thank you, the support feels good."

"Uh, sure." They hugged again and watched the rain. *Okay, Don Joaquín, blurt out the big one.* Jake took both her hands. "Tina, I've been going nuts these last weeks." *Terrible—spit it out.* He released one hand to softly touch her cheek; she lowered her eyes. "Latina, I, uh, care about you more than anyone, period. Nothing else is more important. I know that's corny, but it's how I feel. I love you, Tina."

She sobbed once, looked at him and said, "*Sí, te quiero, amor.*" They kissed then held each other, but a few moments later, she surprised him by muffling a laugh with her fist.

He pulled his head back. "Tina?"

"Sorry," she said around a self-deprecating grin. "It's embarrassing to say, but I practiced saying that over and over in Spanish when I was fifteen. I was sure I'd never say it and mean it. I do love you, Jake."

Part II



Teddy Bear Cholla

10

Jesús didn't slow the squad car when he saw Jake's truck up ahead. "Okay, Jake, downtown's jammed, so I'll go across the valley. After I drop you two off, stay close. I'll go slower up the hills." Jesús stopped abruptly behind the VW, his tires screeching a little. "Wait, Jake, your wallet—you'll need I.D. on the way back."

"Damn it." *Let's see, I last had it . . . when I called Ben.* "I think I left it at the store."

"Which one?"

"Your uncle's."

"Good. As long as nobody took it, he's probably tried to call you."

Crap, what if he doesn't have it? "Okay, we'll meet you at his parking lot. Let's go, Ben."

Jake and Ben jumped out and got in Loretta. He lost sight of Jesús on the first hill, then drove on to Ortega's market and parked by the squad car. By the time Jake ran up to the entrance, Jesús was hurrying out with the wallet and a six-pack of soda.

"Your lucky day," the sergeant said, holding up the billfold.

"Thanks to you, maybe so." Jake put it in his pocket while Jesús handed him two cans of lemon-lime pop.

"Okay, Jake, stay with me; I'll get you right across the border." They ran back to the vehicles.

"Hopefully, we'll see you at the hospital," Jake said, opening Loretta's door. "Thanks again, Jesús."

"Sure. Let's go."

Jake gave Ben the sodas and followed Jesús down the back streets to the border, where two long lines of vehicles waited to cross into Mexico. With Jake right behind, Jesús drove into a closed lane and spoke to a border guard, who removed the barrier and let them both go through. No one was minding the Mexican entry; seconds later they were stuck in heavy traffic on the tourist blocks, the sidewalks swarming with parade watchers and shoppers.

Damn it to hell. Behind several cars and a ramshackle multi-colored bus, Jake watched the squad car ahead as Ben opened the sodas. Jesús was five vehicles behind the final entry in the parade—1976 Miss La Cholla. Moving at a plowing pace, the tractor gradually pulled the pageant queen's float into a left turn for the plaza.

“Okay, Ben, which way when we get up there?” Jake took a long gulp of the cold pop.

Ben pointed toward Jesús. “The same street, but turn right. Then straight, many streets.”

Maybe that place we saw before. “I think I've been there—if we ever get by this light.”

“Maestro, you have black, right here.” Ben touched his own forehead.

“What?” *Oh.* He pointed to the door pocket. “Yeah, I used my oil rag to dry off.” Jake drew the back of his arm across his forehead, just smearing the grease.

After creeping along for two blocks, he made the turn at the PEMEX station. “Damn—finally!” he yelled, passing the small city hall/police building.

Jake accelerated as quickly as Loretta allowed past old La Cholla's handful of middle-class homes, the tops of their walls imbedded with colored glass fragments. He made it up to fourth gear, hardly slowing for the narrow road that dissected block after block of much poorer houses.

After a half mile or so, Ben lifted his arm to say something, but Jake suddenly braked, making a half brodie into a shaded dirt alley by a citron colored two-story building with HOSPITAL in faint black letters on its stucco exterior. He parked behind a blue Karmann Ghia, jumped out, and headed for the door that faced the street.

“No, maestro, Ben said. “The doctor—there.” He pointed to a screen door entrance to an apartment behind the clinic; Jake followed him past the dusty Karmann Ghia. A swamp cooler rumbled away in a back window, leaking moisture below into a garden box of purple and yellow violets.

Ben knocked hard on the screen door, Jake standing right behind him. He struck the wood frame again, even harder, then shook his head. “Not here, maestro.” Ben tried a third time.

Now what the hell do I do?



After two restful days in San Francisco, Jake and Tina kept up the regular calls between Visalia and Lemon Branch. They didn't work out another rendezvous

until three weeks later when Jake drove north on a Friday evening. Tina was coming from Visalia to the Bay Area with her roommate, whose boyfriend was watching Fiera. The plan was for Tina to introduce Jake to her mother the next day.

He turned into the driveway of the Sequoia Waffle House about a half hour before he was to meet with Tina at eleven o'clock. Jake got out; it wasn't very cold and he was wearing a flannel shirt, so he left his jacket in the truck. Walking to the restaurant, he found a bottle cap by a curb, so Jake took a circuitous route to the door, checking the ground for more caps. Someone tapped him on the shoulder and said in a false bass tone, "No bottle cap searching allowed, sir."

What? It's her. He turned, smiling. "Very funny." Tina, in jeans and the blue Kentucky sweatshirt, put her backpack down; they kissed then hugged silently, Jake enjoying the fresh smell of her soft hair.

"You're early," he said, releasing her but still holding hands.

"Yes; so are you. Beth was in a hurry; she wants to stay an extra night with her dad and go back Sunday morning. I told her I thought it would be okay with you."

I'll say. Jake picked up her pack. "Hm, let's see, I was hoping to get weeks ahead on my lesson plans." They walked toward the entrance.

"Of course you were."

"After meeting you-know-who tomorrow, maybe I'll need the extra night to recover."

"Not very nice, but probably true." Tina tugged his hand, pointing at a sign on the door. "Jake, we ate on the trip; did you?"

"Yeah—snacked all the way from L.A."

"They close in twenty minutes; let's just go."

Vámanos.

"Do you want to pick up something to eat?"

"I'll be fine." They started back to Loretta. "Tina, do you mind if we stay at the Seven Days?"

"No, but there are probably even cheaper places."

"Ah, mediocre I can afford."

Jake drove them to the tacky but clean motel; he rented a room with a king-size bed for two nights and proudly signed them in as Jake and Tina Friend, though he didn't mention it to her back at the truck. He got his pack from the back seat, then handed Tina hers.

Jake showed her to the room. "Tina, before we, uh, go in . . ." He sighed. "I just, uh, want to be here with you. If it's too, uh, if you're not ready yet to, uh—"

“Jake, it’s a month now; I was at the doctor’s yesterday. Everything’s okay,” she said, and then blushed as she thought her words sounded a bit eager. “Thank you for asking, Don Joaquín.”



After making love, Tina and Jake slept most of the night in each other’s arms. He woke up in the morning and felt Tina “spooning” in cozily behind. *Man, don’t move; this is the best. Ask her now? Sure, right when she wakes up—very romantic. Maybe after you meet her mom.* Jake saw the clock on the end table. “Wow,” he whispered.

“Morning, Jake.”

He turned over to her; Tina had ponytailed her long hair before bed, and now she didn’t even look disheveled. “Hey, cutie, good morning.” He touched her cheek.

“Oh, sure. I must be a sight.”

“For sore eyes, as they say.”

She kissed his nose. “Jake, what were you just *wowing* about?”

“Did you see how many hours we slept?”

She nodded. “It was a long week.”

“Yeah, I think we were both pooped.”

“Beth makes fun of my sleeping; she doesn’t think teaching is exhausting.”

“It isn’t, if your heart’s not in it.”

She thought for a few moments, frowning. “Jake, how bad do you think it is? How many teachers don’t care?”

“More than people think. Our staff has a clique of six or seven, and half of them don’t even hide it.”

“We have two, just in our wing, who admit they don’t like kids. Why do they teach, then?”

“A job, I guess.”

“That’s very sad.”

“Yeah. We’d better get moving.”

“I think we have time to eat. Mom said she’ll be there all morning.”

“Pancakes and eggs?”

“Definitely.”

In less than a half hour, they got themselves cleaned up and then dressed in jeans and sturdy shoes; Tina put on a plain white sweatshirt and Jake wore the same flannel. He drove back to the waffle restaurant; they sat side by side in a corner booth Jake requested, about twenty feet from any other customers.

After a veteran waitress in “granny” glasses took their order, Tina unfolded a napkin and put it on her lap. “I could eat the whole omelet.”

“Is that why you didn’t order anything else?”

“Yes, it’s the omelet challenge.” She took a sip from what she called her “one daily coffee.”

There’s time now, Jake. “The coffee okay?” he asked, drinking some water.

“Yes, very fresh. Jake, you never told me how Easter went with your family.”

“Fine—all of us, as usual, spoiling Joyce’s kids.” He shook his head. “When the sisters are all together, their intuition is impressive. They somehow knew something was up; I told them a little about you.”

“Oh?” Tina raised her brows. “What did you say?”

“I didn’t overstate things, but I did say ‘serious.’ They went nuts—started teasing me and all that.”

Tina snickered, then contrived a frown. “Poor Huey.”

Jake scoffed. “Yeah.” *Go ahead, chicken.* “Uh, Tina, your mom still doesn’t leave until May?”

“The fifth, I think. Why?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I just wondered how her, uh, leaving might fit in with any plans we might make.” *Geez, what a great start.*

“Plans?” she asked, distracted by the waitress bringing orange juice.

She’s not getting it. Of course not, you didn’t say anything. He thanked the lady after she placed the two glasses on the table.

“Sure, darlin’,” she said to him, walking away.

Go on. Jake took Tina’s left hand after she put down her juice. “Latina, I, uh, know it’s only been a couple of months, uh, and I’ll understand if you want to think—” He stopped when she looked at him, her mouth partly open.

She picked up the napkin to wipe a bit of orange pulp off her lip. “Jake, you’re proposing?”

“I didn’t think you’d be so surprised.” *Screwed this up bad.*

She put her other hand on his. “Well, I just wasn’t expecting it right this minute.”

“Yeah, my timing could use some work.”

She let go, and hugged him around his chest. “You know I love you, Don Joaquín.”

Jake surrounded her with his arms. “I love you, Latina. So you’ll, uh, marry me?”

“*Claro que sí.*” Still snuggled up to him, she began to weep very softly.

He hugged her more tightly. *This is actually happening.* Jake saw their breakfast coming and let her go. Tina sat up straight, dabbing her eyes with the napkin.

"Everything okay, hon?" the lady asked her.

"Yes, thank you." Tina, her face a little flush, smiled to the waitress as she left. "I'm very happy, Jake."

"Me too," he answered with a sigh, "and relieved."

"Oh, you knew you had nothing to worry about." She checked to be sure no one was coming and then moved back to him. They kissed again then released, both of them looking at their food as if they had forgotten it.

"Glory," she said, "look at this omelet; I think I lost my appetite."

"Tina, I don't even have a ring yet. This is just to hold you over." He took a small jewelry box from his pocket and handed it to her.

"My goodness, Don Joaquín. Gracias." Tina bowed her head shyly before she opened the lid. "It's beautiful, Jake." She held up the thin silver chain; a small, brown inset gem hung at the end, refracting in the light.

He drank some juice. "It's just zircon; they called it sienna zircon. It sort of matches your, uh, root beer eyes." *Too schmaltzy, Jake.*

"My what?"

"I'm afraid I've always thought your eyes are the color of root beer." He made a self-critical snort. "Tina, I'm sorry, none of this was very, uh—"

"Don't be silly," she interrupted and smiled, a full one for her. "Put it on me?"

She handed him the pendant, he undid the tiny clamp and secured it behind her neck, the dark little stone falling to the front of her white sweatshirt.

"It really does match your pretty eyes."

"Well, thank you," she said, making an effort to accept the compliment. Tina pecked him on the cheek.

"Uh, the food's getting cold. Can you try to eat something?"

"Yes, after my coffee."

"I think the road snacking caught up with me. I'm definitely hungry."

"Go ahead, Jake, please."

He started into his breakfast, glad he wasn't looking straight across at her after his botched proposal.

Tina finished the coffee and drank some juice, watching him. "What's wrong, Jake?"

He swallowed and put down his fork. "You deserved something better than this."

"Listen, okay? The usual falderal doesn't mean anything to me. What matters is I'll never forget how sweet and sincere this was. *Gracias, amor.*" After they kissed briefly again, Tina finally picked at her food, gnawing on a wedge of toast while he ate.

“Jake, something else . . .” She paused to sip some water. “I absolutely do not want a diamond ring.”

“You’re kidding.” He forked in a hunk of pancake.

“I’m not. You probably already know that the diamond and gold trade in Africa is infamous for abusing the people. I can tell you some stories about that sometime. I wouldn’t want a diamond ring even if you could afford it, believe me,” she said with no hint of rationalization, then ate a bite of egg.

“All right. You never cease to amaze me.”

She smiled at him around a swallow. “How soon were you thinking for the wedding?”

“Unless you want to wait, how about a couple weeks after school’s out?”

“If we keep it simple, that’s plenty of time; we could actually try to enjoy it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been to two formal weddings here; didn’t like either one of them. All that pressure to make it storybook perfect for the people who aren’t getting married.”

“Right, like a performance.”

“Exactly. Let’s make our wedding for us—no church, some close friends and family; then a party with dancing—just a lot of fun.”

“Armando’s group could do the music.”

“Perfect, Jake!” she said, very enthused. “That’s just what I mean.”

He smiled back, then finished his juice. “Tina, what about your mother? She’ll be gone; that’s what I was trying to get at before.”

“Just another reason why June works so well. She won’t have a chance to pressure us about a church. This might sound cold, but I don’t want to tell anyone we’re engaged until she’s gone. I do care about my mother, but this isn’t for her.”

“Okay, that’s completely your call.” He took the last bite of his omelet.

Tina rediscovered some appetite and ate more breakfast, though they again ended up taking her leftovers with them.



Jake drove to Mrs. Linn’s duplex on Redwood Street; there was a parking spot out front. When he turned off the motor, Tina didn’t move; he looked at her.

“Jake, I told her you’re my, uh, boyfriend, and that you’re not a Christian. She just changed the subject.”

“Well, I’m glad she knows. It’s okay; I wasn’t expecting her to be thrilled to meet me.”

“Good. Let’s get it over with.”

After they got out and walked up the path, Tina simultaneously opened and knocked hard on the front door. She called, “Mom!”

He followed her in, expecting Tina’s mother to be surly, but Mrs. Linn came out of a back room with a preoccupied, neutral expression. Jake guessed that her pasty face had never been stained by makeup; everything about the woman seemed certain and emotionless. Not morbidly fat, she looked contentedly oval and thrifty in her drab clothes—a faded yellow housedress and a linty light grey cardigan that nearly matched her thinning neck-length hair. Mrs. Linn just nodded and veered off for her workstation in the small dining room.

“Mom,” Tina said again.

Her mother picked up some stamped letters. An inch or two shorter than her daughter, she spoke to Tina through brown-framed bifocals attached to a black cord hanging from her barely-discernible neck. “Christina, would you take these out and put the flag up when you go, please? He comes before noon.”

“Sure, Mom. This is my, uh, friend, Jake Friend.”

Jake chuckled at Tina’s introduction and started to walk over to shake her hand, but Mrs. Linn turned to her table again. He backed up, stayed with Tina and said, “Uh, it’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Linn.”

“Yes,” she answered. “That is quite a name.” Mrs. Linn pushed a bible and a dictionary away from the phone. “Oh, here’s that letter for Josephine.” She put it with the others and turned around with the mail to face her visitors.

We may as well be selling brushes. “Uh, must be at least ten degrees warmer than the last time I was here.”

“Oh? I wouldn’t know. Would you two care for some tea? I’m afraid that I’m out of sugar.”

“We just had breakfast, but sure,” Tina said.

The phone rang; Mrs. Linn grabbed the receiver. “Six-six-four-oh-oh-one-four.” She listened for several seconds. “Yes, Rebecca, our group would be happy to.” Mrs. Linn wrote on a pad. “And where?” she asked, then answered affirmatively three more times as she jotted. “You’re quite welcome, Rebecca.” She hung up. “Christina, that was your Aunt Rebecca in Redding.”

“I heard.”

“Faith, your second cousin, lives here in the Bay Area. Her husband’s having back surgery this afternoon. I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me while I make my prayer chain calls.”

Tina exhaled audibly through her nose. “How many?”

“Only three, but Mrs. Marsh will insist on talking. Would you still care for tea?”

“No thanks. Maybe we’ll drop by later; I’ll call if it works out.”

“Yes, call first. I’ll be grocery shopping this afternoon.”

“Okay, see you, Mom.”

That’s it? “Uh, good to meet you, Mrs. Linn.”

“Yes. Oh, Christina.” Mrs. Linn walked forward, holding out the letters. Tina took them; she and Jake turned around and walked to the door.

On the way out, Jake heard the phone, then Mrs. Linn: “Six-six-four-oh-oh-one-four.” He and Tina single-filed down the stairs to the narrow path.

“That’s not quite what I expected,” Jake said quietly, following her toward the curb.

“Really? How could it have been any worse?”

“I guess I expected a little hellfire and brimstone.”

“Outwardly, she’s always low key.” Tina put the letters in the mailbox and lifted the red flag.

They climbed into Loretta; Jake put the key in the ignition. “So you’re really not going to tell her we’re engaged until she’s gone?”

Lips pursed, Tina frowned. “That’s right. Let’s go, Jake; I’m *not* going to cry over her.”

New subject—now. He started the motor. “Okay, are we still beach-combing at Candlestick Point?”

“Yes; maybe we’ll pick up, uh, a ‘sperm picnic’ for later.” Though she was trying to lighten the moment, Tina made the suggestion solemnly.

“Good idea,” he said, chuckling for both of them as he drove off. “What time do you want to get back to your mom’s?”

“I don’t. She had her chance.”

11

In the weeks that followed, the newly engaged couple began discussing over the phone some tentative plans for the future. They agreed that they would like to start a small family and “use” their profession to live in a bilingual community, with Tina returning gradually to the classroom. As for the wedding, they were thinking about a justice of the peace, probably in L.A.

They told their close friends about the engagement as soon as Mrs. Linn left the country in early May. Tina drove south in her mom’s big Pontiac to see Jake, meet “the sisters” and tell them the news. Joyce Friend immediately offered her home in Pomona for the wedding at the end of June; Tina and Jake gratefully accepted.

Three weeks after Tina’s visit, Jake intended to drive up to Visalia for Memorial Day, but the Friday morning before the long weekend, Loretta’s old generator gave out. The truck would be in the shop until after the holiday, waiting for parts. That night, Jake called Tina to tell her what happened.

“You sound pretty happy, considering that Loretta’s under the weather.”

“Had a beer or two—she’s just a truck, right?”

Tina didn’t answer right away. “Are you still coming?”

“Sure, I’m catching a ride with Armando tomorrow morning; he’s going up to Fresno to see his folks.”

“Good. I have something I was going to tell you.”

“Did you get around to telling your mother about the wedding?”

“Yes, a couple days ago.”

“Did she call me a heathen?” he asked, laughing.

“No. She said congratulations and started talking about her mission—just what I expected.”

“Oh well, life goes on.”

“Yes.” Tina paused. “Jake, that’s not what I wanted to tell you. Are you sure you’re, uh, okay to talk to me for a minute?”

She thinks I'm plastered. "Tina, Armando and I just had a couple; I'm fine, okay?"

"All right. I'm late again, Jake; I went to a doctor right away this time. He says I'm five weeks pregnant."

I'll be . . . "My God, Tina, you are?"

"Yes, but I was a little embarrassed after he asked all his questions and said it was 'an easy one' to estimate. Clockwork again, I guess."

"And you're feeling okay?"

"Just fine."

"Man, do I, uh, get to say congratulations?" He sounded giddy.

"Of course, Jake. How about congratulations to *us*?"

"Yes, to us!"

"We'll celebrate when you get here tomorrow, okay?"

A sobering thought crossed his mind. "Just a little celebrating, Tina; we have to start being careful, you know."

"Yes, that's true." Chuckling at his sudden seriousness, she told Jake that her local doctor was current on pre-natal care and had given her the latest dietary regimen.

"Good, I guess you'll just have to stop being such a boozier."

"Yes, and knock off all the smoking and drugs."

"I'm so happy about this, Latina."

"Oh? I couldn't tell. Me too, amor."

"Are we going to let anyone know?"

"I just found out today. It's still so early; let's wait a while."

"Sure, whatever you think. It's good I'm not driving; probably get a speeding ticket."

"Not in Loretta," she gibed.

"Yeah, wise guy. Tina, Armando reads me like a book. He'll know something's up."

"Okay, just go ahead and tell him, unless he's seeing Orie."

"No, he plans to visit an old girlfriend." Jake settled down some more; they spoke for another half hour, mostly about her health, their plans for the weekend and how they would meet up in Visalia.



The small house Tina and Beth rented was actually in a town east of Highway 99, so on Saturday she drove her mother's Pontiac through the smoky fields to Visalia. Tina waited for Jake and Armando at a Mexican restaurant known for

“the best chile relleno in town.” They found her before one o’clock at a secluded table, sitting beneath dark green, cactus-shaped candelabra.

Armando went right over to her. “Sorry, Skip,” he said back to Jake, “I get first *abrazos*.” Tina stood up; Armando gave her a big hug. “*Felicidades, maestra.*”

Jake tapped him on the shoulder. “Okay, cutting in.” He embraced Tina and they kissed.

“All right, you guys, come up for air; I’m hungry,” Armando said with a wide grin. During lunch, he and Jake chatted with Tina over a beer while she had juice and watched them eat all three *buñuelos*, the complementary pastries that came after the meal.

“Another beer, Mando?” Jake asked him.

“Nah, I’m driving.”

Jake laughed. “Yeah, and I might have to navigate the Linn barge.”

Tina ignored Jake’s wisecrack, placed her napkin on the table and looked at their friend. “Armando?”

“*Sí, maestra.*”

“Are you sure that you and your *banda* don’t want to be paid for the wedding?”

“No, that’s my *very* expensive present.” Armando bent his left arm and hit his elbow with the other palm, a common gesture for *codo*, meaning *cheapskate*.

Jake and Tina laughed; then she asked Armando, “Can you handle a wedding march, too?”

“Yes, we have a portable organ.”

“And Joyca has a piano,” Jake added.

“Either one; I just need the sheet music that Tina wants.”

Tina patted his hand. “*Gracias, Armando.*”

“My pleasure, maestra. Okay, guys, I gotta get my fanny up to Fresno.” He reached for his wallet.

“Don’t even think about it,” Jake told him.

“Thanks, Skip. Monday at noon, then, right here.”

Tina and Jake saw him to the door, then came back to dance once to the lively local Mariachi. When they went out to the Pontiac, the temperature was in the upper eighties, not unusual for the San Joaquin Valley in late spring. After she asked him to take the keys to the “Linn barge,” they got in front and kissed again until Tina chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” he asked her.

“I can just picture my mother’s face if she saw us making out in her car.”

“Imagine if we were in back.” He turned, pretending to ogle the spaciousness behind. “Mmm, pretty tempting.”

“A bit warm and much too public, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Jake answered with a false pathetic frown.

“So sad, Don Joaquín; maybe I can cheer you up. Beth is gone today, and my doctor said that, um, sex within reason is okay, even recommended.” Tina raised her brows invitingly and blushed.

“Not another word,” he said, pretending to desperately start the car, fumbling intentionally with the keys, activating the wipers and bumping the horn. He drove away past two teens in the parking lot who gawped at them as if they were old and crazy, making Tina and Jake laugh even more.

They were soon out in the country. “Man, these strawberry fields—forever.” When she didn’t acknowledge his Beatles reference, he turned to her.

She touched her abdomen. “Jake, I probably shouldn’t have had that salsa; it didn’t settle very well.”

“Heartburn?”

“Guess so; I’ll be fine.”

He drove on for a mile or so, but she began sobbing very quietly. “Tina, what’s wrong?”

“It isn’t, uh, heartb—don’t know,” she told him, clutching herself. “Oh, no. My God,” she said around breathy heaves. “I’m . . . cramping, Jake.”

Jesus. “Easy, Tina, it still could be the food.” *Damn it to hell.* He stopped immediately at the side of the road and helped her lie down on the back seat. Jake saw that the back of her tan skirt was stained. *Oh God, no.*

“Go, Jake,” she cried, not very loud.

He scrambled up front, U-turned the car for Visalia and floored the accelerator, passing the strawberry fields and looking for hospital signs. Barely sensible enough not to make things worse, Jake drove through red lights and stop signs at the intersections where traffic was sparse. Tina moaned and made more muffled cries, Jake telling her repeatedly, “Hang in there, we’re almost there.”

At the hospital, he ran inside for a wheelchair; a nurse came back out with him. He followed them in, carrying Tina’s purse and intending to stay with her.

“Sir, I’ll take her right in; please stay here at the desk for now. We need you to start the paperwork.”

He kissed Tina on the cheek. “It’ll be okay, Latina; they’ll take care of you now. I’ll be right there.”

Tina was silent and had stopped crying; the nurse started to wheel her away. Jake turned to the receptionist at the desk.

“Sir,” the woman said, “the patient’s last name, first name, and middle name, if any, please.”

Jake told her, and then began flipping through Tina’s wallet for the necessary numbers, reading them aloud with abrupt impatience. After several more minutes, they finally let him join Tina and the nurse in the exam room.

“She’s going to be fine,” the nurse said to him. They had already cleaned her up and Tina was lying there in a hospital gown, her eyes now dry, staring up at the drip flowing into her arm. They had her sign the admission papers and a permission form for Jake to receive her medical information.

He stood there, smiling awkwardly, holding her hand; Tina closed her eyes. After another minute or so, the nurse asked Jake to wait in the emergency lobby. She said that Doctor Ames would come out to see him soon after he gave Miss Linn a more thorough examination.

Jake kissed Tina on the cheek again before he left. He walked down the hall and stood by a plush chair across from a fidgety couple in their late teens. They were listening to an elderly physician with a slouched medium build and curly grey hair. Jake tried to peek at the name badge on the man’s lab coat, but the doctor and the couple left in different directions. Jake sat and leaned forward, pinching his brow with an index finger and thumb, his mind jumbled with disconnected thoughts about Tina and their future.

The same doctor, now in green scrubs, approached Jake about twenty minutes later with an encouraging smile and said, “You must be Mister Friend. I’m Doctor Ames.”

“Yes, hi doctor.” He stood to shake hands; the physician led him into a quiet room with a couch and chair, but they remained standing. Worrying about the doctor’s competence, Jake suspected he was about seventy and thought he looked like the pope in hospital scrubs.

“Mister Friend, your fiancée did have a very early miscarriage, but she’s doing well now. Christina’s resting in her own room, half asleep and just waiting for you.” The doctor briefly checked the clipboard he carried. “No complications; there was no excess bleeding, her uterus is clear, and there’s no apparent damage. By tomorrow afternoon, she should be ready to leave.”

“Then she just takes it easy for a few days?”

“That’s right.” Ames smiled again. “She asked first about you, then if she could still have children, and whether she could teach next week. I told her you’d be there soon; that yes, she could still bear children; and we’d talk about work later. Next week is her last, right?”

“Yes, Tuesday through Thursday.”

“If she’s up to it, maybe she can go on Thursday.”

“She’ll go—believe me. In fact, when you next see her, I’d appreciate it if she hears directly from you that Tuesday and Wednesday are out.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Most vital right now is support, even more so since this is probably her second one. A miscarriage is hard on dads too, but we can’t fully understand how traumatic this probably is for her. It would be best if someone is with her these next days.”

“It’s my last week, too; I’ll take the time off.”

“Very good, Mister Friend. Any other questions?”

“Not yet. Thanks for being so, uh, on top of all this. I’ll go on in then, unless she’s asleep.”

The physician grinned. “I don’t believe she’ll go completely to sleep until she sees you.” He looked at his papers. “Room one forty-two.”

“Thanks again, doctor.”

Tina’s eyes were closed, and she still had an IV attached when Jake walked into the small generic hospital room. He sat quietly in a visitor’s chair, but she opened her eyes right away.

Jake stood up and took her hand. “Hey, Latina.” He smiled at her, but his emotions pressured his eyes.

She kissed his wrist and said, “Thank you, Jake.”

“Didn’t do anything.”

“I’m so lucky you were here.” Before she finished the sentence, tears raced down her cheeks.

He held her in his arms a few moments, his eyes now damp. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

They kissed briefly, then Tina spoke quietly. “I have to talk to you, Jake.”

Still holding her hand, he said, “Tina, you need to rest and—”

“I know, just a couple things; then I’ll probably go right to sleep.”

“Okay, only a minute or two.”

Before Tina could begin, two nurses started jabbering loudly in the hall. She saw Jake glare at them.

“Jesus Christ,” he grumbled, “don’t they—”

“Jake,” Tina interrupted, “it’s all right. Please just close the door.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Calming himself, he got up, pulled the handle, and then scooted the chair to the bed, taking her hand as he sat. “Okay, cutie, what is it that can’t wait?”

“I’m worried about you. You were so excited about the baby coming.” She touched her eyes with a tissue.

“Tina, I’m fine now that you’re okay. And you heard what the doctor said about having children.”

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

“Yes, he’s so much nicer than the last one I had.”

“I should hope so.” He squeezed her hand. “Kids will happen for us someday, Latina.”

She tried to smile. “Okay, Don Joaquín.” Tina sighed deeply, wiping her eyes again. “Jake, the other thing is, uh, what about school? I can’t just *not* go back to my class before the year’s over.”

“You don’t have to. The doc said if you promise to rest until Wednesday, you can go see them on Thursday.”

“He did?” She started crying again. “I’m sorry, Jake. I was so worried about that.”

Jake hugged her. “Yes, Ms. Linn, I know you were.”

He stayed near Tina for the rest of the day and sat with her all night, eventually falling asleep in the chair.

12

He took Tina home the next afternoon and nursed her until she was on her feet in a couple of days. While he had some time, Jake went ahead as they had planned and started their resignations in motion. Still three weeks before the wedding, they launched a job search through Jake's placement center, which allowed them to register as a "teaching couple."

They applied to four districts in the Southwest and had two leads within ten days. They accepted an interview with a small rural district near the Mexican border in Arizona. Their administrators were coming to Los Angeles on a recruiting trip, just days before the wedding.

Jake and Tina finished up in Lemon Branch less than a week before the interview. They drove to Pomona to finalize wedding arrangements and to stack Jake's possessions in Joyce's garage. Fiera made friends with their white Labrador, so Tina and Jake left the next day without the dog. They drove to Visalia and began moving Tina's things out of her rental into a small storage unit.

Two days later, they headed south in the early afternoon; the temperature rose as they came to the desolate fringes of the Mojave Desert.

"So what did you think of my uncle and aunt?" Tina was asking him about her relatives from Redding who came to Visalia that morning to pick up the Pontiac.

"They're not quite so, uh, intense as your mother."

"Nice adjective, Jake. You don't have to try so hard not to hurt my feelings when you talk about her."

"Is that what I do?"

"Yes. Just be yourself. I'll tell you if I think you're wrong."

"Okay, it's a deal."

They stopped for cold drinks near Bakersfield, then began discussing the fate of their modest belongings. Some of it, they decided, would be sold, recycled, or given away, but the rest, including their books and teaching

materials, was too much for Loretta, so they would have to rent a larger truck after they found new jobs.

That topic eventually petered out at the Grapevine, north of L.A. Jake scanned the straw colored tinder-dry hills, perfectly primed for Southern California's next big wildfire. He knew the high desert was sometimes degrees cooler than the basins, but this day it was sweltering at all altitudes. Jake and Tina were in shorts and T-shirts, and had all the windows open; she was looking out her side at a lone scraggly oak. Tired of her hair blowing everywhere, Tina deftly secured it behind her head and turned to him.

"Jake, what about Fiera?"

"What about her?"

"I have a friend who would adopt her."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"No, but you saw how it was, taking her to L.A. A longer trip could be difficult."

"C'mon, she's not that bad."

"You haven't lived with her."

"We'll be okay; she loves riding in Loretta."

"All right; I just hope you don't regret it."

The steep incline made Jake settle his truck at about thirty-five in the right lane where they watched the traffic whiz by. "Can you imagine if the back was full on a grade like this?" he asked.

"Would she make it?"

"Yeah, in second gear." He pointed to the side of the road. "At least we don't have to worry about *that*." A fortyish man in a shirt and tie confidently poured liquid into the radiator of an early-sixties ash colored Chrysler, its yards of chrome shimmering in the sun. "Probably running an air conditioner," Jake added dryly.

"The tortoise passes the ol' grey hare." Tina sipped the last of a large lemonade.

Jake snickered. "You're too funny, Latina. So, what about Loretta? Do we keep her?"

"Don't be silly. If I keep my pet, you keep yours."

He grinned. "Okay, cutie, we'll honeymoon in style with both of them. I know we talked about Oregon, but see what you think of this: Tomorrow, these guys are going to stumble all over themselves to offer us contracts, and—"

"How do you know?" she interrupted.

"They aren't just eager; I think they're desperate, and surprised to have

two qualified people who might forsake the land of milk and honey to go down there. If they offer us contracts, maybe we should visit the place before we sign.”

“Drive down there after the wedding?”

“What do you think?”

“Sounds sensible, but are we in a position to dictate terms like that?”

“We already have another interview if we want it, and I’m pretty sure these guys will give us time to decide. We could visit Grand Canyon; we’d even have a place to stay in Flagstaff.”

“I’d love to see Grand Canyon.”

“Then let’s do that, no matter what. I’m not worried about finding a job.”

“I am, Jake.”

“You are? Why?”

“I’m not sure. Tomorrow, do we tell these people we want to start a family?”

“No. It’s none of their business.”

“Okay, but there’s one thing I won’t do.”

He smiled. “Only one? Let’s see, there’s no wasting food, no diamond rings, no kids dumped in special ed. Oh, and no turning around, and—”

“Jake, it isn’t funny.”

“Hey, I love you for those things. Sorry—what were you going to say?”

“I won’t quit in the spring because I’m having a baby. After we get jobs, I want to teach the whole year.”

“Yeah, of course; we’ll be careful.”

“Next July would be the earliest, so we have to be *careful* a couple more months.”

“Yes ma’am, I’ll curb my enthusiasm whenever we, uh, trip the light fantastic.”

“What does that mean?”

“Hm, dancing, I think. Can I take it back?”

She laughed at him as they made it to the top of the Grapevine. The downhill air offered no relief; it was even hotter the closer they came to Los Angeles.

They stayed in Burbank that night with Hannah Friend, the unmarried lawyer, and planned to get an early start to the interview the next day. Tina and Jake spent the evening in her air-conditioned home, eating barbecued chicken while Hannah filled them in on the grape boycott and the fall of Saigon, hardly mentioning the wedding. She was the least ebullient of Jake’s siblings over the event. Before bed, Jake came down from two large frozen

daiquiris he drank and listened impatiently to Hannah's report on the family's moribund lawsuit against the hospital where their mother died.

After breakfasting with Hannah the next morning, they left for Los Angeles. Jake encountered a traffic jam on the freeway, making them a few minutes late for their nine o'clock appointment.

Of the opinion that a necktie wouldn't help him land any job he actually wanted, Jake wore his usual teaching garb for the interview. As always, he felt proud of his bride-to-be but thought she was a bit gussied up in a white blouse, grey skirt, and polished black low-heeled shoes. Tina gave her freshly shampooed hair no extra attention other than the usual thorough brushing that brought out its sheen. She hauled along her big Cameroon flag purse as they made their way across campus.

It was another hot morning, but as soon they were inside, the aggressive air conditioning left even the hallways chilly. They checked in with a secretary, who directed them to a bald man in a tan summer suit, waiting with his coffee by an interior door. He was over six feet; his excess weight made it difficult to tell if he was around forty or fifty.

Jake heard the man burp as they walked up to him. "La Cholla School District?" he asked.

"Mister Friend and Miss Linn?" The administrator lowered the cup from his sunburned face.

"Yes. Sorry—we were stuck in traffic."

The man forced a smile and limply shook their hands. "Jon Munz, Special Programs, and principal for Sofia." He pronounced it SOFE-yuh. "We'll begin with Miss Linn." She walked with him to the unmarked door.

What's this guy's story? Jake saw Tina look back, intimidated, he thought, as she went into the corridor before Munz. *She'll be okay.* He sat in one of the plastic chairs by the door, put down his spiral notebook and opened a thin paperback. He began *The Moon is Down*, the next in his odyssey of Steinbeck's lesser-known novellas. Jake nearly finished a fourth of the World War II story by the time Tina emerged, holding a tissue.

Munz was right behind her. "Mister Friend, we'll need a minute before we see you," the obese administrator said, then left before Jake could stand all the way up. Tina sat down; he waited until she stopped dabbing her face.

"You okay, Tina?"

"Yes. Mister Munz told me in the hall I did fine; who knows what that means? I just hate this sort of thing."

"I'm sure he was right."

She shook her head. "I was okay until they had me explain why special ed.

is important. I said something dumb like every child needs a chance to learn. I talked about Graciela, one of my Down's kids." Tina took a deep breath. "I started crying; it took forever after that."

He put an arm around her. "Tina, take Munz at his word; you probably did better than you think."

"Blubbered my way through." She sniffled, drying her eyes again. "I'm so hopeless sometimes."

"You aren't either. Let's just see what happens."

Munz came out again. "Okay, Mister Friend."

Jake stood, facing Tina. "Sure you're all right?"

She glanced at Munz before extracting a nest of knitting from her purse. "Of course; go ahead."

Jake left the novel with Tina, picked up his notebook, and then followed Munz down a long narrow hall into an interview room, where two more men waited at a ten-foot rectangular table, office chairs all around. There was a pitcher of ice water, napkins, cups, and doughnuts on a desk by the door. Jake's place was obviously behind a single sheet of paper at the head of the long table.

"Help yourself before you take the hot seat, Mister Friend," Munz said, snatching what was probably not his first powdered confection of the day.

"I'll have water, thanks," Jake said, nodding toward the panel members without really looking at them. After he poured the water, Jake put the glass and notebook by the paper, reading its title: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS—ESL/SOFIA. He looked up to see the other two men, who were now standing.

"Mister Friend, I'm Raul Ortega, Superintendent, this is Mike Serna, School Board President." Serna leaned over to exchange handshakes, his grip intentionally tight.

Ortega's grasp was firm but not aggressive. Jake sat, watching the two men take their seats. Finishing the doughnut, Munz wiped red jelly from his mouth with a napkin and pushed his belt below his belly to get comfortable.

As he sipped water, Jake noticed Ortega and Serna both had fair skin and wore neat summer suits; he thought they could pass for Anglo businessmen. Serna was younger, maybe forty, a plump five-eight, with receding brown hair, severe dark brows, and trendy sideburns. Ortega, Jake decided, was one of those timeless seniors who would look fifty for the rest of his life. Slim and almost six feet tall, his age lines vanished with an easy, calm smile; he had a full head of brownish blond hair with tinges of grey. Looking very relaxed as if he might not say another word, Ortega spoke again.

"Mister Friend, is Miss Linn okay?"

"Yes, thank you, she'll be fine," Jake put down the glass.

"Is she always so, uh, emotional?" Serna asked.

Jake detected a slight frown from Ortega in reaction to Serna's question. "She's actually pretty tough," Jake said, "even if she does cry easily."

"Miss Linn seems very dedicated," Ortega interjected pleasantly.

"Yes, she is." Jake saw that Munz was oblivious to the interchange, working his tongue to dislodge dough from his teeth.

"Mister Friend," Ortega said, "the position you're interviewing for is rather unique. We have an old elementary school in Sofía we re-opened last year with two classrooms, one for grades six to eight, the other nine to twelve." Ortega paused. "*Señor, este programa en Sofía,*" he said in rapid Spanish, "*is for youth who are recently arrived to our school district; the majority have not studied much in Spanish or in English. ¿If you understand me, what are the first questions you would have about such a program?*"

Jake answered in Spanish at about the same speed. "*Sí, señor, I understood and I have some questions. ¿Primeramente, please explain to me what the basic educational goals are for the program?*"

"*You both speak very well,*" Ortega said, continuing in Spanish and smiling again. "*Your teaching objectives would be to instruct one of the groups in basic education and teach them English as a Second Language.*"

"*¿Y los estudiantes, how many in the two groups?*"

"Let's return to English now, Mister Friend. Okay then—we want to keep class size below twenty in each room; we'll eventually add rooms, I'm sure. The majority of the students come from around La Cholla."

Only twenty? Perfect. "Do you mind if I ask what happened to the first teachers?"

"A teaching couple. Put it this way: some of our questions today are designed to show us if you are likely to have similar problems, which is about all I can say for now. We'll be happy to answer anything else at the end of your time. The first five questions on your sheet are about your background; please just answer them in order after you have read the page. We will read the second five questions aloud. Please take a few minutes to review all ten of them."

"Sounds good." While the panel members chatted quietly, Jake skimmed the first five questions and found them to be pretty standard. He took his time reading the second five, not surprised that they were mostly about organization and discipline. Jake told them he was ready, then used about ten minutes to answer the five background questions and respond to their follow-ups.

"You speak the lingo better'n me; where'd you pick it up?" Serna asked in a snotty tone. Jake gave him the usual explanation about learning the "bad

words” as a kid in L.A., then mentioned his Spanish minor in college, a summer in Mexico City and the six months in Texas and Costa Rica.

Stuttering slightly over the words, Munz read question six, a classic one asking for self-evaluation of “strengths and weaknesses.” Jake handled it humbly but with confidence, and then Ortega and Serna read two discipline questions. Jake described the kind of structured plan he knew they wanted; he sensed from them that the school had been beyond unruly.

Munz started the ninth question. “Since the school in Sofia is somewhat isolated from the rest of the district and there isn’t an on-site principal, how would you describe yourself in terms of being an independent self-starter?”

Good, this means I’d never see the guy. Jake pointed out similarities between their program and the one he began “from scratch” in California, which was one reason, he said, why he preferred to teach the older group.

“One of the teachers,” Munz replied, “will have to be lead teacher and do the paperwork—there’s some extra pay in it. Are you willing to do that if you’re hired?”

Does he do anything? “Yes, I would do it.”

“All yours, Mike,” Munz said, eyeing the food again.

Serna spoke up in a brusque tone. “All right, Mister Friend.” He cleared his throat and started reading. “Ten: A teacher wants his students to learn about photography. He also wants them to have, uh, a hands-on experience, so he has them take apart and reassemble the school’s movie projector. What do you think of this approach? Please be specific with your answer.”

Easy. Jake organized his thoughts a moment. “Okay, the basic idea here is a good one. I like its appeal to a sense of discovery and wonder.” He paused and saw Serna’s frown turn to a complete scowl. *Hold your water, schmuck.*

Jake continued. “For starters, of course, you don’t attempt this project with equipment you depend on and are responsible for. You could get serious about this idea only if you can find discarded equipment. Next, you’d need to focus on what you’re teaching—photography, mechanical science, mathematics—though I like the idea of using one discipline to support another. Then, what are the specific goals of your instruction? Do you expect the students to be able to—?”

“Excuse me,” Ortega broke in, “I’m going to stop you since we’re running out of time, and I believe you’ve already answered this to our satisfaction. Any follow-up, gentlemen?” He looked at the other two. Munz shook his head, and Serna just turned away.

“Okay, Mister Friend, what other questions do you have for us?”

“Well, I think I have a pretty good idea about the job; your brochure

answered most of our questions about the community and the district. One thing I didn't see is anything specific about medical facilities. Is the nearest hospital at the university?"

"We need to add that to the brochure, Jon," Ortega said to Munz, then turned to the Board President. "You want to fill him in, Mike?"

"La Cholla," Serna said it, Luh-CHOY-uh, "might be small, Mister Friend, but we are a modern town with electricity and flush toilets." He sneered sarcastically. "We have a small Catholic hospital with a very professional staff, including two local doctors." He finished in a huff, as if daring Jake to ask another question.

"Uh, that's good to know." *Pendejo*. "That's all I have for now."

"Thank you, Mister Friend," Ortega said. "It's quarter to eleven; we should be able to tell you and Miss Linn something by the hour, if you'd care to wait."

"We can do that. Thank you."

"I'll show Mister Friend out," Munz said, getting to his feet.

Why? Jake walked to the door first, opened it and waited for Munz; they started down the hall.

"You did great," the administrator said from behind.

"Uh, thanks."

"Nobody told you this, okay? Miss Linn is in, and you have my vote. Serna doesn't like you, but don't worry about that; he doesn't have any pull with Ortega—a lotta ol' family crap."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, just the way it is. See you in a minute." Munz turned and started back. Jake opened the door and walked over to Tina.

She looked up from her knitting. "How did it go?"

He sat down. "I knew it, Tina, they loved you—you're in."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I'm the problem. One of them doesn't like me."

"The school board jerk," she said immediately.

Jake chuckled. "Yeah."

She gritted her teeth. "Well, I don't like *him*."

Man, Tina critical? "What did he say to you, Tina?"

"Nothing. It was *how* he spoke to me, like I was a little girl. And, well—now don't get mad—but he, uh, when we shook hands, he put his other hand in my hair, behind me; the others couldn't see. You know I'm not touchy, Jake, but it was on purpose."

Jake had started shaking his head in the middle of her explanation. "I'll be a son of a bitch."

“It’s not that big of a deal; he’s just a creep.”

“Do you still want to work for these people? I think we’re going to get the offer.”

“My job is perfect,” she said, now more enthused than upset. “Ten or so kids, two aides; Fridays for lessons and all the paperwork. Ortega’s nice; I think Munz will be easy to work with. I can ignore the other guy if you can.”

“As long as the *cabrón* stays away from us.”

“And your job?”

Jake told her he was just as enthusiastic, adding that Munz probably wouldn’t even know what they were doing.

“Do you still want to see the place first, Jake?”

“No, I’m not worried about that now, if you aren’t.”

13

Three days after they accepted their new jobs, Tina and Jake's wedding, as intended, did not much resemble a traditional June ceremony. The bride-to-be decided to have a real pastor, which was okay with Jake, who sat quietly the day before in the office of Joyce's clergyman while Tina answered most of the reverend's nose-y pre-nuptial questions.

That evening, Tina was more excited than nervous over the event, her anticipation exacerbated by her brother flying in from New York to be the "father" of the bride. Tina and Jake took a break from the hubbub at Joyce's house and went for a stroll in T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops.

The neighborhood was about ten years old, street after street of two-story homes on hilly lots barely large enough for small front and back yards. The plain architecture of the light pastel houses repeated before the end of each block. As dusk approached, most places had a few lights on and a silvery TV glow projecting from at least one room.

Walking in the street since there were no sidewalks, Jake let go of Tina's hand, pointing toward a typical two-car garage with a basketball hoop and backboard. "So what do you think of the suburbs?"

"The houses are nice, but I don't think I'd like to live like this."

Thank God. He took her hand again. "And what makes you decide that, Ms. Linn?"

Tina grinned. "You can't call me that much longer."

"If you say so." He pointed to a house with a ten-foot tree out front, fully bloomed in lavender flowers. "So, Ms. Friend, what *don't* you like about this?"

"Mrs. Friend to you, sir." She nodded to the same colorful tree. "See this jacaranda? It's one of my favorites, but did you notice there are two on every block, one on the corner and another in the middle? It's all so planned; the owners haven't even changed their yards much."

"Which is what a lot of commuters want, I guess."

They walked on. "I wonder what kind of place we'll find down there," Tina said.

He raised an arm toward the homes. "I just don't want neighbors so close we can hear them fart."

She wrinkled her brow. "I agree, and I think I'm starting to get used to your, uh, graphic images."

"Not original, believe me." Two pre-adolescent boys zipped by them, getting in a last bike ride before dark. "Well, Latina, you certainly hit it off with Joyce's kids."

"They're so fun, creative and—"

"And spoiled?"

"They're not that bad, Jake; they definitely love their unc."

"Yeah, but I'm glad I don't teach younger kids. I don't think I'd handle them very well."

"You might be surprised."

They were silent for a short time, walking by the block's one palm tree. "Your sisters have been wonderful," Tina said. "They've taken care of everything just the way we wanted. Do you think it would be ungrateful if I changed one thing?"

"I doubt it. What is it?"

"Caroline's husband is supposed to pick up Jimmy at the airport in the morning. Would you do it instead?"

"Sure, is there some reason?"

"There won't be any time tomorrow. This way, you'll have a chance to get to know my big brother."

"Okay, I'll tell Joyce and Caroline."

The next morning, Jake took the freeway west through yellow-tinged grey smog to L.A. International to pick up Jimmy at ten o'clock. He took a wrong turn in the airport loop and ended up back on the freeway at nine thirty. Jake exited onto a surface street, turned around, got stuck in traffic, and finally came back onto the loop almost at ten. It took minutes more to park, then he jogged to the terminal but had to slow down in one of the porcelain tunnels because foot traffic was heavy both ways.

Halfway to the gate, Jake heard a *toot-toot* behind him, turned and saw a black man in uniform driving an electric cart and calling in a deep monotone, "Mistah Martin, comin' through," and then just, "Comin' through."

Bull, keep going. The sea of commoners parted for the dignitary, some began to applaud; Jake used the opening to jog forward until the cart caught up with him again.

"Mistah Martin comin' through," came from behind; Jake moved to the

right but kept trotting. The crowd was close enough to the wall that the cart made it around Jake, who looked over at the bored driver. In back, the celebrity had his face buried in a newspaper with a picture of Dodger ace, Don Sutton, on the front. *Screw you, Mister Martin, and the Dodgers too.*

By the time he arrived at the gate, Jake was twenty minutes late. Since Tina told Jimmy to watch for *a bearded guy in a Cubs hat*, Jake thought about holding his cap in the air, but there were only a few people hanging around as the agent closed her station.

He saw who he was looking for—a guy in a denim shirt, glasses, and a Mets hat. Tina's habit of calling Jimmy 'big brother' made sense right away when Jake saw he was of average build and an inch or so over six feet tall. Jimmy had straight light brown hair down to his neck, full sideburns, and wasn't nearly as fair as Tina. The two young men said each other's names at the same time, smiled, and shook hands.

"Sorry, Jimmy, I took a wrong turn or two."

"It's okay, but aren't you from here?" His tone was curious, not judgmental. He held a plastic dry-cleaning bag over his backpack.

"Yeah, doesn't help much; L.A. traffic's bad for everybody. Do you have luggage checked?"

"This is it."

"Good, that just saved us a half hour. If you don't need anything, I'd like to get out of this madhouse."

"Right. Let's go."

"I'll hold your suit if you want." Jake took the bag and showed him the way out, neither of them saying much. *A man of few words—like his sister.* Regardless of Jimmy's glasses, Jake noticed his sepia brown eyes were like Tina's, but her brother had long ears and a more angular face. *Sort of like a tall, intellectual elf. Bad, Jake.*

They made it to Loretta, exited the garage, and then Jake felt obliged to communicate. "Jimmy, how did you get to be a fan?" Jake pointed to the Mets hat.

"I came to school in New York in sixty-nine, when—"

"Right, their first Series. Did you know much about baseball?"

"Almost nothing."

"So what interested you?"

"Physics, partly. I heard people talking about Seaver's curve ball."

Jake inched ahead in a midday traffic jam. "And?"

"I didn't believe that the ball could curve."

"Believe me, it curves—never could hit a good one."

"I'm still not convinced it isn't an optical illusion. To me, it's great how

the whole game is based on science—physics, geometry, an interplay of time and space.”

“Please don’t say it’s a game of inches.”

“No, millimeters.” Jimmy smiled for the second time since they met.

Jake returned a grin. “Well, some people think the game has a sort of poetry to it.”

“Yes, but so does science. I also like how baseball sometimes helps me break the ice with people—like right now, I guess.”

Finally up to ten miles per hour, Jake glanced at his soon-to-be brother-in-law. “So I bet you think Seaver’s better than Reuschel,” he said, feigning a scowl.

“I know he is, Jake.”

Discussing the wedding, their families, and more baseball, they got back to Pomona around one o’clock, three hours before the ceremony. Jake drove into Joyce’s driveway; Tina was on the front lawn playing some sort of tag with two of the kids, who ran in to announce Jake’s return. Tina scurried over to Loretta’s passenger side before Jimmy was on the ground.

“James, Dad-hug.” Tina reached out for him.

“Absolutely, Christina.” Jimmy took her into his arms; both he and his sister were laughing uncharacteristically.

“Man,” Jake said as they let go, “Christina and James? Didn’t expect that—your little joke, right?”

The Linn siblings chuckled again before they got Jimmy’s things and started for the house with Jake; Tina walked in the middle, holding their free arms. “So, how are you two getting along?”

“Your big brother’s okay, mainly because he hates the Dodgers and Yankees.”

Jimmy scoffed. “Yeah, I’ll let you marry him, Tina, misguided though he is.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he says the Cubs have a better chance than the Mets of winning the pennant.”

“You know they do, Jimmy.”

After Jake’s retort, Tina’s face was beaming as they all walked in the front door.



The ceremony that afternoon filled Joyce’s living room, vacant of most furniture except for ten rows of borrowed, unmatched chairs. The well-wishers

included a dozen or so of Jake's Southern California relatives, mainly from his father's side, as well as his parents' closest friends. A few Linn relatives from Redding attended, and more than twenty friends of the bride and groom.

At five minutes to four, Tina and Orie waited in a bedroom at the top of the stairs. The bride wore a crown of daisies and a simple white cotton dress she brought from Cameroon; it was embroidered in bright, iridescent colors, a style characteristic of the grasslands region of that nation. Orie, the only bridesmaid, shimmered in her tight, dark blue formal gown, turning the heads of many in the crowd.

The rest of the small wedding party waited near the bottom of the stairs, starting with Jimmy, who would escort Tina across the room. Armando, in his *banda* uniform of black pants, white shirt and string tie, played a classical waltz softly on the piano—the sheet music from *The Sound of Music* wedding march propped and ready in front of him. Jake and a boyhood friend, the best man and keeper of the two silver rings, waited in ordinary dark suits, ready to join Tina, Jimmy, Orie, and the preacher at the double doors that looked out on Joyce's patio.

Two of Armando's musicians, helping out by seating the guests, walked urgently up to their leader to whisper something. Armando stopped playing, got up and spoke to Jake. "Skip, there's a slight problem. Some old guy named Pearlman is making trouble."

Crap. "My uncle; I'll take care of it." Jake went to the front door where another *banda* member was trying to reason with Rose Pearlman's only sibling. Myron, like his nephew, was just under six feet, but thin as a matzo sandwich. He still had much of his dark brown hair, cut short and combed back. Nearing retirement as an accountant for the power company, Myron Pearlman was, in his own words, "an influential businessman."

Jake approached his uncle, whose tan summer suit hung from his bony frame like a bed sheet out to dry on a still day. Freckles and liver spots blemished his jaundiced pale skin; he had a black mole like a curled-up spider on the side of his chin.

"Hello, Uncle Myron," Jake said, trying to be cordial. The musician walked away, relief on his face.

"Jake, about damn time," he snarled, then covered his mouth with the long, pocked fingers of one hand. "What's with all the spicks and *schvartzes* here?" he muttered under his breath.

Jesus. "Friends of ours, Uncle Myron."

"Christ's sake, Joyce should have a place for me," he said in a normal tone, several people turning toward him.

“First come, first served today, as advertised, but I see a spot in the fourth row there. Let me take you over.”

Uncle Myron clenched his jaw. “Jesus, some deal.”

Jake escorted him to the chair; Myron dusted the seat with his handkerchief before sitting between the very pregnant spouse of a musician, and a female friend of Tina’s from Kenya, both of whom Jake met earlier.

Good spot for the old kvetcher. Jake touched his guests’ shoulders. “This is my Uncle,” he said with an impish smile; the women greeted Myron amiably. “Enjoy the wedding everybody.” As Jake left, he heard Myron mumble a Yiddish epithet.

Though there had been no rehearsal, the principals in the wedding knew the very loose plan and patiently waited their turns, chuckling good-naturedly at a few minor foul-ups. Jake heard later that his uncle blustered out of the house as soon as the ceremony was over.

At the reception on Joyce’s patio, Fiera inhaled every dropped morsel of hors d’oeuvre and wedding cake, Joyce’s husband dubbing her, “a brown torpedo vacuum on legs.” It became quite the party; the champagne flowed and the revelers danced to Armando’s group for two hours before the Friends and Fiera took off in Loretta, looking out windows soaped with bawdy witticisms. Toilet paper fluttered and empty beer cans clattered behind the old green Volkswagen; many of the neighborhood kids stopped playing with bikes or basketballs to gawk from their identical driveways at the passing spectacle.

14

The freeway was only four blocks away, so Jake stopped at a market parking lot to prepare Loretta for the road and to shake off the effects of too much champagne. He put down the coffee Joyce gave him and saw that Tina was crying just a little as she helped him unsnap the tarp.

“I assume those are mixed tears—right, Tina?”

She sniffled quietly. “What?”

“My guess is you’re happy with the wedding and sad to be leaving Jimmy.” He yanked a snap and looked in the bed.

“Yes, but there’s something else.” Tina resolutely wiped her eyes with her T-shirt sleeve.

“Hold that thought—can’t find anything in here.” Pushing aside their gear and luggage, Jake took out a spray bottle and a newspaper. “So what was the ‘something else?’”

“It’s a strange feeling, being around most of the people we care about for days, and now here we are in a parking lot, driving off to where we don’t know anyone.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of unsettling.” He took the pocketknife out of his jeans, put it on the rail and hugged her with one arm. “Wasn’t it like this the times you went to Africa?”

“No, it feels a lot different; maybe it’s because I didn’t care much about the people we left behind.”

“Well, we do have one of our friends with us.” He let go and pointed to the truck’s cab, where Fiera was hanging from a side window, tongue all the way out, waiting.

“Silly dog, she’s ready,” Tina said with a chuckle.

“Yeah.” He handed her the bottle and paper. “If you’ll start on the windows, I’ll cut all this crap off.”

After a few minutes, Jake tossed a string of cans into the bed, and then drank more of his coffee. “That’s it, Tina.”

“Me too, except this last one.” She sprayed over HOT SPRINGS TONIGHT!—soaped onto the rear window. “I won’t be able to reach all of it.”

He took the paper, leaned way over and wiped. “What did you think of Orié and Armando today?”

“Oh, I know; they danced every time he took a break. She’s very impressed by his talent.”

“Me too. I knew he was good, but not that good.”

After he finished wiping, they secured the tarp and got in; Jake headed for the freeway. “I think it all went pretty well, except for my uncle’s bruised ego.” Jake explained why Myron was so incensed.

“Jake, I didn’t even meet him.”

“It’s all right. My guess is he won’t talk to me for quite a while.”

“My glory. That’s too bad.”

“Not really, though it probably cost us a couple hundred bucks.”

“Why is that?”

“He doesn’t do presents—strictly cash. He would’ve probably slipped us some big bills on the sly, and then bragged about it to my other relatives.” Jake spotted the Interstate sign. “We can live without his shekels. Okay, that’s it—Uncle Myron doesn’t get one more second of our honeymoon.”



The newlyweds planned on a week in Northern Arizona before they would venture down to the border to check out Sofia, La Cholla, and their new jobs. Using his buddy’s place near Flagstaff as a base, Jake and Tina marveled at the enormity of Grand Canyon and the power of the Colorado River, but it was the vermilion gorges of the Navajo Reservation that beckoned them to return someday.

After a Monday lunch with Jake’s friend, they headed south through more stunning red rock country, denouncing the area as too commercialized compared to the isolated canyons of Navajoland. During their long descent into the Sonoran desert, they listened to Randy Newman, Credence Clearwater, John Denver, and the Beatles on the eight-track. Jake could have kept up with traffic, but he coasted Loretta at times, especially after they came into the tall cacti.

“The saguaros are amazing,” Tina said.

“Yeah, even a lot of the shrubs are green.” Jake turned off for a rest area. “Man, the Mojave never looked like this.” The temperature was mercifully moderate at around ninety degrees as he and Tina led Fiera out to pee near

some brittle white bushes that seemed to grow out of black rock. Jake wondered to himself about the constant buzzing and clicking he heard, like a downed electric line.

They finally rolled into the Phoenix outskirts and were impressed that some of the residential development had preserved acres of desert between home sites. That impression quickly dissolved when they passed industrial sprawl and Levittown-type neighborhoods before coming to the city's center, a concrete confluence of freeways and tall office buildings. Tina turned on the radio; an announcer said it was still before rush hour, but Loretta was soon stuck for ten minutes in smoggy one-hundred-two-degree heat, creeping along in low gear behind an oblivious boy in a maroon Porsche with an A.S.U. sticker, his stereo blasting the "Stones" for all to hear.

Jake cleared the traffic jam, exited, and drove through some suburbs where all activity revolved around the pervasive cars, just like in L.A., except most of the autos here seemed new. Unimpressed by the strip malls, golf courses, and opulent homes with fairway lawns, it dawned upon Jake that all of the unnatural greenery survived on precious water from the same river that awed them over the last few days.

Heading back toward the freeway, they happened upon a local café with a rock garden and the only cacti they had seen for blocks. He parked in some shade; Tina took Fiera out into the weeds while Jake walked back to the café to order drinks and burgers to go. He complemented the owner on her front yard, but she told him, "The place came that way; wish I had a lawn instead."

Eating off of their laps, they left Phoenix and came into miles of hot, humid farmland. "Yuk—looks and feels like the San Joaquin Valley," Jake said, scanning the smoky fields. "But next spring it'll be great to visit here."

"Why? You obviously don't like it very much."

He tipped the bill of his baseball cap toward her. "True, but I do love my Cubs."

"I don't get it." Tina gathered the trash from their late lunch and checked her panting dog.

"The Cubs had spring training in L.A. and on Catalina Island for years before they moved here. That's one reason why they have so many fans in L.A."

Tina turned to him. "Ah, now I know why you wanted to come to Arizona."

"My secret's out," he said with a grin.

As the miles went by, the agriculture and turbid air diminished. The closer they came to Tucson, the more the Sonoran desert seemed to regain foothold, the saguaros gradually reappearing by the road.

It was after six o'clock, degrees cooler and much less humid as they watched orange wisps of clouds form above the hills to the west. Jake heard a buzz droning from the desert, the same noise he noticed before Phoenix. "You hear that, Tina?"

"What?"

"It's getting louder, that constant buzzing."

"Locusts, I think. That's how they sound in Africa, anyway. You get used to it."

"I'll be. I never heard them, even in Mexico."

"Well, they do come in cycles—and the bible tells me so." She sang the last six words.

He laughed at her little parody as they came to a billboard for "Old Tucson," a fake town in the saguaros used as a backdrop for Western movies.

Jake pointed out the sign. "There you go, Tina. Guess who must have spent a lot of time in Old Tucson?"

"Hm, would that be the Duke—of York?"

"Geez, how did a mish kid get to be such a wise guy?"

"Oh, I get by with a little help from Jake Friend," she sang, this time at the expense of the Beatles.

"Very funny—you're on a roll," he said with a laugh, approaching a strip of motels north of town. They soon discovered that the downtown area wasn't near the highway; Jake took an exit, and turned back for the motels.

They came to a residential neighborhood, modest stucco houses on large lots, many of the yards rocked in around natural desert plants. A few people poked around the homes as if these were their first moments outside for the day.

Loretta passed a block of small businesses, the sun was still just above the horizon; a bank sign blinked **7:34 P.M.** and **91°**. The next neighborhood was chiefly old frame homes surrounded by flowers and fenced dirt yards. Many families, mostly Mexican-American, were outside, barbecuing under shade trees, the kids playing and hopping around to the steady beat of *cumbias* and *rancheras*.

The truck came to a stretch of open desert; Jake took a gravel side road for twenty yards before stopping to exercise Fiera. They got out into a comfortable warm breeze; Jake was surprised to see a mountain range to the north that appeared to have sufficient altitude for snow. Tina opened the back door; the dog went berserk with her freedom, darting out into saguaros that seemed to reach up to the deepening red sunset.

While they prepared a bowl of water for Fiera, an occasional car passed behind on the road. Hooked together by index fingers, Tina and Jake strolled

into the desert through leafy acacia, green skeletal branches of palo verde, and tall wiry stalks of ocotillo, all names they would soon have a chance to learn.

Tina pointed to the ground at a black "hand" slowly crawling by. "Jake, is that what I think it is?"

He looked down from the flame colored sky. "Man, looks like a tarantula to me."

"It doesn't even care we're here."

"We don't want Fiera to mess with it; we'd better get her." Right on cue, the rambunctious dog burst from the brush with a long, sun-bleached rib bone in her mouth.

"She's too excited to have done her business," Tina said, pushing the dog's bowl with her foot. Fiera came right to the water, released the rib to the ground and slobbered the bowl almost dry. She picked up the bone again and turned to them, seeming to smile.

"Okay, baby, give it," Tina said, taking the new treasure and tossing it past the truck, away from the spider's path. They played with Fiera for a few minutes until she finally pooped in the sand. After using the bone to entice the dog back to the truck, Jake drove off for the strip of motels. He had to ask two managers before a third one agreed to accept Fiera, but only with a damage deposit.



After a mid-morning breakfast the next day, they started out and soon passed a small Indian reservation before Jake realized he was on the wrong road. He stopped, checked the map, and then turned Loretta around to get back to an eastbound federal highway, which they took to the next junction before heading south again.

They were back out in open desert, mostly low rolling hills and dry arroyos. The inclines kept Loretta well below the speed limit; only one car passed them on the quiet two-lane road. Her head out the back window, Fiera's ears flapped in the very warm and dry morning air.

The saguaros had become scarce but other desert flora flourished everywhere, especially the palo verde, which in places grew over twice Loretta's height. Jake spotted a squat barrel cactus, remembering it from school science, then some branchy low cactus with lucent white needles.

"Wonder what the white ones are," he said just as Tina pointed out a sleek bird by the road, sprinting side-by-side with Loretta until darting away into the bush.

"I had no idea roadrunners were that long," she said.

“Me either. Check this.” He nodded ahead to a wide billboard, the only manmade object in the entire panorama save the road and power lines. The sign read:

SHANGRI-VILLAGE—5 MILES
ARIZONA’S FINEST RETIREMENT COMMUNITY
TURN ON VALHALA DRIVE TO VIEW MODELS

“Out here?” Tina asked.

“Yeah, I thought Sun City was a Phoenix thing.”

Loretta chugged over a moderate rise, catching up to a line of dark blue military vehicles, mostly jeeps and vans. Jake followed them past more billboards and down into to a valley where the Air Force convoy exited at Valhalla Drive. Jake stayed on the road and drove slowly by the development in third gear, wondering if the airmen were on maneuvers. He found out later that for the second time in months he had inadvertently driven close to a ballistic missile site.

Shangri-Village turned out to be row on row of flat three-bedroom homes on standard lots, with tall fencing for residents who didn’t face the golf course. To achieve a “territorial” ambience, the houses had faux red tile roofing, each façade with at least one Spanish arch.

About a mile square, the development had replaced the desert with carpets of green turf, flowering exotic trees, and different kinds of imported palms. Jake spotted some of the same tropical bushes he was accustomed to seeing on the streets of Southern California.

Loretta passed the Elysian Shopping Center, where the military convoy mustered at a newly painted parking lot the size of a football field. The enterprises facing the road fulfilled basic needs—a restaurant, groceries, drugs, and a gas station, each one covered with that same red roof. The other side, Jake thought, must have had offices for tax preparation, a clinic and a mortuary. An advertised recreation center for tennis, swimming, meetings and the like was apparently behind one of the green hills on the golf course.

At the southern end of Shangri-Village, giant yellow graders, earthmovers and dump trucks crawled busily over the hills, clearing desert for the next mile of “gracious retirement living.” As soon as Loretta rolled by the excavation, they came back into indigenous flora.

“Well,” Tina said, “hopefully, we won’t need to go back there for anything.”

“La Cholla should have what we need.” Jake drove on a few minutes and came to what his parents always called “a little wide spot in the road.” In this

case, it was a cluster of small frame and brick houses, one near the highway and the others off a ways, separated from each other by tall desert growth. Two more miles down the road, the next populated outpost had a small grocery out front. They stopped, bought cold drinks, and munched on the pancakes, sausage and scrambled eggs Tina saved from breakfast.

They passed another wide spot with a produce stand advertising ELOTES/SANDIA. "Mm, cold watermelon sounds so good," Tina said.

He glanced at her. "Some restaurant in near the border should be able to handle that."

"Jake, this is it." A crooked, green rectangular sign by the road had SOFIA written in faded white capital letters.

"Man, not even a speed limit change." He passed the withered shell of a fifties-era gas station and then a closed fruit stand. Another hundred feet or so brought them to a driveway for a small open-air restaurant attached to a cinder-block house. A homemade two-by-ten-foot sign out front said, CHIMICHANGAS – OPEN FRI/SAT AT 5. Above the desert brush beyond the simple house, Jake saw the roofs of two more small bungalows.

"Looks like the only business." He checked his rearview, and then downshifted all the way to second. Fiera sat up on the back seat and stuck her nose out into the warm air again. Jake drove slowly through Sofia, which was turning out to be not much more than a few consecutive wide spots—about two dozen brick or cinder-block houses, a TV antenna on each roof.

For an early Tuesday afternoon in July, the scattered population was relatively active, especially the kids, trying to fit in a full day's play before the heat drove them inside. Mostly in shorts, T-shirts and sneakers, the generally dark-skinned children ran in and out of slamming screen doors while older siblings and relatives hung wash or tended vegetable and flower gardens. Jake noticed "project" vehicles in many yards, parked under shade trees. The cars in the driveways, '60s models or older, were shiny and probably well maintained, he thought.

Some youngsters near the road paused to watch the Volkswagen truck roll slowly by. "I guess we're quite a sight," Tina said, turning back to check Fiera, who had jumped down on the floor, panting again.

"I'd bet not many cars slow down. Then there's Loretta—the big kids are probably thinking 'hippies.'"

"Oh well." Tina patted the dog. "Jake, Fiera didn't drink much at the store; she's ready now."

"Yeah, it's getting humid again. I'll find a place to stop." He shifted up to third gear and passed a clump of houses, not finding anywhere to pull off. Jake

came to a junction of sorts with a gravel side road and the only street sign in town: SCHOOL RD.

He made the turn. “All right, now we won’t have to ask for directions; this should work for the dog, too.” The rough road looked more to Jake like a firebreak in the thick Sonoran underbrush. “Good God, I guess the school has to be in here somewhere.”

15

Not fifty yards from the highway, a dusty, long-ago-scraped flat five acres materialized from the desert like a mirage. A one-story red brick building stood at its center, a half-acre of lawn and a huge weeping willow out front. “I’ll be,” Jake said, coming to a stop.

Tina said nothing, both of them still surprised by the isolated school. Jake looked down and saw that the hardscrabble ground by the road had managed to reproduce low mesquite, some prickly pear and the same kind of “white” cactus he saw before. At closer look, he realized each slender green branch was thick with ivory colored quills, giving the false impression that the succulent plant was furry.

Jake put Loretta in gear and drove up to the freshly cut grass and recently trimmed willow tree, its long branches hanging uniformly about five feet off the ground as if it had a “bowl” haircut. The wooden sign posted in the lawn said: SOFIA SCHOOL – LA CHOLLA S.D. A swing set, slide, monkey bars, five wooden picnic tables and a flagpole survived in worn but decent shape on the grass in front of the school. Out in the nearby dry dirt, someone had put in a brick barbecue, two horseshoe pits and a tetherball pole.

Two thin girls with braided raven hair stood there holding the tethered grey ball and gazing at Loretta. One was a pre-adolescent, the other, much younger, had some kind of brace on her leg. A dilapidated light orange Ford pickup waited just off the lawn, LA CHOLLA S.D. stenciled on the door, a power lawn mower strapped into its bed.

“Somebody’s here—great.” Jake cut the engine and opened his door. “Man, I was expecting everything to be more run down.”

“I’ll take care of the dog while you check it out,” Tina said. “Join you in a minute.”

Jake attached Fiera to a longer leash, actually a twenty-foot chain, and left her with Tina. He walked onto the lawn’s paved path, waving over to the two

girls, who didn't notice him because they were watching Tina pour water for Fiera in a slit of shade by the truck.

The closer Jake came to the school, the more he could tell its advanced age. The masonry between the red bricks was worn, showing gaps and holes; the brown trim around the windows, doors, and flat roof had faded and started to peel. The windowpanes were scratched, chipped and milky, except for two newer ones on each side of the wide-open double front doors.

Just before the stairs, Jake spotted a strange little trove of three identical cola caps in the grass. He bent over, pocketed them, then climbed the four wide concrete stairs and walked into the school.

The lights were off inside, but the sunrays from behind reflected off the heavily lacquered wood floor, casting light all the way down the hall to a GYMNASIUM sign above the closed back double doors. The opaque glass upper halves of seven hallway doors were inscribed with a black number or some block lettering. Brass coat hooks lined both walls, about four feet above the floor on one side, five feet on the other. The nearest doors on the right, labeled OFFICE and CUSTODIAN, were both ajar.

"Hello!" Jake called, his voice echoing some.

"Here. Just a sec," came forcefully from the custodian's room. An elderly man, about five-foot-eight, muscular for his age, entered the hall. His ears protruded from a grey-white crew cut; he plucked a pencil from one ear, inserting it into a front slot on his faded jean overalls. He had a small carpenter's level in one pocket; a beat-up tape measure hung at his side.

"Is that your truck out there?" he asked with a scowl in clear English.

Jake backed off a step as if he were about to go and move the truck. "Yes. Is it in the way?"

"No." The man eyed Jake's cap, beard, white T-shirt, brown Bermudas, and sneakers.

Jake noticed the custodian's closely-trimmed white moustache; he saw some small black moles, barely visible on the man's sun-weathered but only slightly wrinkled brown face. "I'm Jake Friend, new teacher here." He offered his hand to the sturdy old man. "I have the nine-twelve students."

"Figured. *Emilio Montalvo*," he said, not anglicizing his name as they grasped hands comfortably. "Good to meet you," Emilio added, not as hostile.

"Glad to meet you, Mister Montalvo. Do you work here full time?"

"Half, but full time for a second straight summer, thanks to your predecessors."

Predecessors—my, my. "Oh? Why is that?"

"Last summer I had the refurbishing crew." He sighed and frowned at the

same time. "This year, well, I'll let you see for yourself." Emilio removed a wad of keys from a pocket and led Jake down the hall.

"The place looks good for its age, outside and in," Jake said before they came to a room with "4" on the glass.

"Yeah, get a load of this—grades six to eight." He opened the door and Jake walked in first, hitting a switch that lit up some glass fixtures above. The back wall had a seam in the middle; to its left, the room was barren. The walls were pungent with a fresh coat of tan paint, the wood floor slick and shiny, and the nearby window had new panes.

The right side was piled high with desks, tables, chairs, and overflowing boxes of books, materials, and equipment. Beyond that, Jake saw bright tempera paint dried all over a sink and splattered onto gouged walls and a cracked green chalkboard. The guts of two broken light fixtures hung down like jellyfish tendrils, and a torn shade leaned on some plywood nailed over the second large window.

Friggin' tornado. Jake walked up to the nearest cardboard box; it was full of blue plastic casing, small pulleys and cables, lenses, knobs, bolts, screws—the remnants of a film projector. *So, the interview question came from this little experiment.*

"You should see the damn floor under there," Emilio stated blandly. "After this side dries, I pull all that over here and do it again. What do you think?"

Jake pointed to the left side of the room. "I think you do excellent work." He faced the custodian. "I also think you have every right to be pissed. So they just up and left it like that in June?"

Emilio scowled again. "It's not that unusual. Seems like there's a teacher in the district who pulls this kind of crap every other year or so. This is the worst I've seen—your room is probably the second worst."

Jake laughed. "Great. That makes my day."

Emilio managed a reluctant smile, exposing crooked teeth and more creases around his mouth and eyes. "You want to see it?"

"Sure, let's go."

They walked down the hall toward the gym, but Jake stopped to look at the wall above the higher coat hooks. Someone had begun a mural, about five by fifteen feet, in a style similar to the Mexican artist, Clemente Orozco. Not a fourth painted, the full sketch showed robust cotton-clad workers with pre-Columbian features, heroically pointing their straw sombreros to show the women and children the way across the desert.

"You like it?" Emilio asked glumly.

“Well, I think the art work is very good, but it looks kind of, uh, romantic.”

“Yes, it’s just missing poverty, *la migra*, and the damn *coyotes*.”

“They started making this last year?”

“No. We had a small arts grant a few years ago. They paid the kids and me a few bucks to start it.”

“Really? Wasn’t the school closed then?”

“The district rented it to us cheap as a community center; we did the upkeep, paid the utilities.”

“Why didn’t you finish the mural?”

“Didn’t reapply—too many strings; we got tired of working on something so, uh, *falso*. I’ll paint it over one of these days.”

Jake followed him to room 5; Emilio unlocked the door. “This used to be the old five-six; we didn’t have to change much in here last year.” They walked in.

As before, everything was moved, but Emilio had yet to paint the dirty walls or varnish the scarred floor on the left side. The mess was similar to the other room, except the lights were intact and neither window was broken. The sink area was filthy, and the stacked materials were in complete disarray, most of them not even boxed.

“Pretty bad,” Jake said, “but it’s my room now; I’ll help you with all this. Looks like a lot of it can be ditched or stored.”

“We have storage space in the other two rooms.”

Jake pursed his lips in disgust. “For what it’s worth, this won’t happen again as long as I’m here.”

“Good,” Emilio said, not sounding very convinced as they left. He locked both rooms, then walked down the hall with Jake. “Want to see your office?”

“I think that can wait; I should check on my wife.” They walked out the front doors. Fiera was on her back under the tree, soaking up attention from the girls, who were alternately latching onto Tina and playing with the dog in the grass. Jake noticed the younger girl wasn’t letting the bulky leg brace keep her from all the fun.

“I think we’ve made some friends,” Jake said as they walked slowly down the steps together. “Do you live in Sofia, Mister Montalvo?”

“Emilio. My whole life, except four years in the Army and one in school.”

Hm, World War II or Korea? Jake walked out on the path with him, gazing at the nearby wilderness.

“It amazes me, Emilio, that the desert is so green here, compared to the Mojave in California.”

"More rain, although I think we're behind this year. By now, more cactus should be in bloom."

The smaller girl stayed with Fiera while the older one pulled Tina toward the two men. Jake saw his spouse smiling freely, not the obligatory half smiles she made around most adults.

"*Abuelo*," the girl called, her two pigtailed whipping around. "Can she be my teacher?" The pre-teen was neatly dressed in a summer blouse, knee-length shorts, and leather sandals; her pretty, café au lait features radiated around a single flaw, prominent white buckteeth.

"No, *mija*, but you'll see Mrs. Friend at your school."

"I can visit you there, teacher?" she pleaded, still holding her hand as they came close.

Tina patted the girl's arm. "Of course, Rosalinda."

"You hear her Spanish, *abuelo*? She speaks good."

"Yes, she speaks well, *mija*. Remember your manners and greet Mister Friend."

Rosalinda finally let Tina go and reached out for Jake's hand. "Nice to meet you," she said shyly.

"A pleasure to meet *you*." Jake smiled, releasing her light touch.

"Mrs. Friend," the old man said, "please excuse *my* manners. *Emilio Montalvo, a sus órdenes*."

"*Mucho gusto, señor*." Tina smiled and shook his hand.

"*Encantado*," he answered with a slight bow.

Jake glanced over at the little girl tumbling with Fiera and getting her summer clothes grass stained. "You two seem to like our dog," he said to Rosalinda.

"Yes, she's friendly, not like her name." The girl was exuberant again. "I hope you can be our neighbors and we can visit you."

"Rosita," Emilio interjected kindly, "you can go back now with your cousin." She ran off; Emilio turned to Tina. "Thanks for putting up with Rosita's, uh, enthusiasm."

"Not at all. She's wonderful; so interested in everything, a teacher's dream. Is Nora just learning English?"

"No, she hardly speaks at all around strangers. Nora will be one of your students."

Tina's face was pensive; Jake was sure she was already churning over how she could help the child. "Emilio," he said, "from what you and Rosalinda said, I'm guessing you have something to do with the schools besides maintenance."

"I'm a janitor who can fix the easy stuff, and the at-large Board member," he replied, watching the girls.

"Good, so Sofia has a little clout?"

"Very little." He faced the young couple. "Are you folks planning to take a look at La Cholla today?"

"We just have the rest of the day," Jake said, "before we start back tomorrow." He saw Tina smiling toward the kids.

"Plenty of time to get a feel for the place." Emilio shaded his eyes and turned to Tina. "My sister's son, Jesús, is off Tuesdays; I know he'd like to meet you both and show you around."

"We don't want to impose on anyone," she said.

"I'm certain he'll want to do it; I'll call him. Excuse me, I'll be right back." Emilio bowed again to Tina, then turned to go in the door.

Jake and Tina started toward the tree; he grinned at her. "Well done, Latina; you charmed him."

"What?"

"He was pretty grumpy until he met you."

"Ridiculous."

Jake snickered. "I know what I saw."

Tina scoffed and headed for the children. Jake stayed behind, watching her rejoin the girls before he walked out past the barbeque pit. He leaned down to inspect a white-quilled cactus, and then spotted a different kind with skinnier branches and only a few drab spines. Jake compared them, then moved his hand back to touch the white one.

"Don't let that teddy bear bite you," Emilio said from behind.

Jake retracted his finger and stood. "Yeah, they fascinate me. Do you know what this one's called?" He saw that the old man was now wearing a western-style straw hat.

"Just said it; teddy bear *cholla*."

"It is? My Spanish dictionary said *cholla* is another word for skull."

Emilio nodded. "Yeah, but the English dictionary will tell you it's a cactus. Anyway, you're all set. I spoke to Jesús; he's on his way."

"That's great; thanks, Emilio. Uh, do you know anything else about these?" He pointed at the two different cacti. Jake squatted, carefully touching a white needle. "Man, it's sharp all right."

"There are several kinds; I know of only three around here," Emilio said, betraying some enthusiasm in his voice as Jake stood up to listen. "This teddy bear cholla is the most handsome, but they all get flowers. People call them 'jumping cactus' because if you touch one, it jumps onto your hand." He

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

smiled. “Actually, you have to touch it pretty hard—some birds nest in them for protection.”

“Incredible.”

“They say the Apache threw chollas down from the cliffs onto the Spaniards, then onto the Mexicans and the *gabachos*.”

“I’m surprised you let it grow close to the school.”

“We didn’t before, but they come back fast. When a piece of cholla falls in the dirt, it can take root right there. Our kids know the results of messing with them.” He looked at the girls playing with Fiera. “It’s dogs that never learn; be sure you have good pliers.”

Jake sniggered. “Great, knowing our dog, she’ll—” He stopped when he saw a light blue police car come down the road toward the school. “What’s this about, Emilio?”

“That’s your ride today, maestro.”

16

Jake watched the big Ford sedan with L.C.P.D. on the side pull up near Tina and the kids. Little Nora tried to run to the car, limping with a radical gait, her single long braid flopping behind. A man got out and lifted the child for a big hug. He was in his thirties, about five-ten and trim in a T-shirt, jeans, sneakers, and an orange ball cap. Rosalinda ran to greet him as well, then hurried back to Tina.

“Let’s go meet my nephew,” Emilio said to Jake. They walked together from the dirt onto the grass and started across.

“Can he take us over the border in a police car?” Jake asked.

“Yes, but I didn’t know you wanted to do that today.”

“It can wait.”

Rosalinda ran up, Fiera right behind, to take her grandfather’s hand and lead them to the new arrival. “Abuelo, can I take care of the dog while they go to town? Please?”

“You need to ask—”

“I did, I asked teacher and tío Jesús.”

“Okay, mija,” he said, and she skipped off ahead with Fiera. The nephew, still carrying Nora in one arm, was shaking hands with Tina on the lawn near the tree.

As Jake got closer, he saw black lettering on the officer’s white T-shirt: XL - LA CHOLLA P.D.; his cap had a blue Denver Broncos logo. Nora nestled her small dark face into her daddy’s shoulder, peeking at Tina.

Jesús greeted his uncle with a pat on the shoulder, then turned his stubbly vacation-day chin to Jake. “Jesús Ramos,” he said, putting a hand out, a pleasant smile on his almond-colored face.

“Jake Friend.” They shook with firm but friendly grips. “Nice of you to show us around.”

“Yes, thank you,” Tina added.

"My pleasure. The Superintendent has told me good things about both of you," Jesús said, Nora clinging to him, her black eyelashes downcast.

"He's made us feel very welcome to the district." Jake glanced at Rosalinda and Fiera playing under the tree. "Jesús, how do you want to do this, with the dog and all?"

"Just follow us; you can leave the truck and the dog at my place."

"Okay, will do," Jake said, still unsure about who went where with whom.

"See you there then." Jesús turned to Emilio, putting Nora down. "*Adiós, tío*; thanks for letting her come." Hand in hand, Nora and her father started for the squad car at the child's halting pace.

"Rosita will go with you then?" Emilio asked the Friends.

"Sure, she can start her dog-sitting," Tina said.

Jake reached out to shake the custodian's hand. "Thanks, Emilio. I hope you'll show me more about the desert."

"If it's something I know, maestro." Emilio grinned humbly, then he bowed slightly to Tina again before heading back for the school.

Jake and Tina walked toward the tree. "So, Don Joaquín," she said, "now who charmed the old man?"

"What?"

"You two are already science pals." She couldn't hold back a titter.

"Okay, okay; I think we'll get along fine. Let's get our passenger and that wild dog of yours."

With Rosalinda and Fiera in back, Jake drove out in the dust left behind by the squad car. He followed them back to the other side of Sofia to the small restaurant they saw earlier. Jesús turned off the road, driving by the CHIMICHANGAS sign and through tall green brush over to the far side of an attached cinder-block home.

Jake followed him around to what turned out to be the front of the square house, facing away from the highway. Tall green pickets closed in the lawn and a long bed of roses, blooming in several colors. One crimson variety was trained to climb on an arbor over the front walk. Beyond the flowers, a huge gnarled oak shaded much of the big yard that extended around the grey home to the restaurant.

Jesús left his car idling in the wide dirt driveway next to an old Malibu and a newer Ford truck. He walked back toward Jake as Rosalinda and Fiera jumped down from Loretta. Nora opened the gate and then hobbled in after Rosalinda, who had to duck under some errant rose branches. A short woman in a housedress faced the yard from behind the screen door. She let out a tan part-Chihuahua that ran right over to sniff Fiera's rear end.

“Anywhere’s fine,” Jesús said to Jake, then started back to his vehicle. “*Abuelita* will keep an eye on your dog.” In silhouette, the grandma raised her arm.

Jake parked by the Malibu; he and Tina got out, waved to the woman, and saw the kids and dogs already romping across the lawn and into their own world.

The Friends continued over to Jesús, who waited in the squad car, its right-side doors ajar. Tina got in back, Jake in front, separated from the driver’s seat by a black console with a clipboard on top. Not accustomed to air conditioning, Jake shivered once after he closed the door.

“That was Emilio’s wife, *Alicia*,” Jesús yelled over the blasting air. Nodding to the house, he turned down the fan and lowered his voice. “She’s everybody’s *abuelita*; you can meet her when we get back. Seat belts, please.”

Tina and Jake secured themselves as Jesús started down the driveway. With the exception of some extra switches, a spotlight handle and the silent police radio, Jake thought the squad car was like any austere Ford. He decided that the other cop equipment was locked in the console or the trunk. Jesús stopped at the road to record something on the clipboard; Jake assumed it was mileage.

“No radio on your day off?” Jake asked.

“Right; the car’s just a deterrent today.” He tilted back his orange cap and looked up at the rearview. “You okay back there, Mrs. Friend?”

“Yes, I’m fine. It’s Tina.”

Jesús smiled back and made his left turn. South of Sofia, the desert looked about the same as it did to the north. Jesús crossed a bridge over a fifty-yard-wide dry arroyo he called “*Sofia Wash*.” He and the Friends exchanged a little information about their backgrounds; Jake took the discussion further by asking about the local history. Jesús said that about half of the eighty or so adults in Sofia were related to Emilio or his wife, who was from another old family, the Ortegas.

“Is she related to the Superintendent?” Tina asked.

“Yes, *Alicia*’s his first cousin.”

Jake noticed the desert was turning hilly, and he saw a rail line by the highway. “Are the Ortegas related to the president of the school board?”

“Serna? Probably, if you go way back, but they’ve had feuds for generations. You may as well know right off the bat—the Sernas and Ortegas have most of the influence here.”

Jake realized that Jesús pronounced all the surnames except Serna in Spanish. “And Montalvo, how do they fit in?”

"Emilio is from another of the original families; mostly workers for the Sernas in the past."

"So, you're part Ortega and part Montalvo?" Tina asked.

"Yes, from my mom. My dad's people, the *Ramos*, are latecomers. My wife, *Ana* is a *Morales*; she and I have all the old families covered, except for the Sernas."

Jake grinned. "I'm afraid you lost me."

"It takes a while," Jesús said with a laugh.

Tina spoke up again from behind. "Will your wife be home when we get back?"

"Yes. Ana's shopping for the restaurant—she runs it."

"Maybe we can try it out tonight," Jake said.

"*Cierto que sí*," Jesús answered with another smile.

They left the desert and came to a long cinder-block warehouse with SERNA PRODUCE, INC. painted on the side in four-foot red letters. Some scraggly desert shrubs grew around the rusted wheels of a ramshackle brown boxcar parked on a side rail by the hangar-sized building.

Jake turned to Jesús. "Where's the produce from?"

"Some from here in season, but Serna makes his big money in winter fruit and vegetables trucked in from Mexico."

After the warehouse, they went by a quarter mile of small frame or brick houses with big yards, gardens and trees, resembling the low-income neighborhoods Tina and Jake saw in Tucson. They passed another block of homes, two of them doubling as repair shops; a large house on one street corner was also a small grocery.

Jesús entered downtown; the street sign said, INTERNATIONAL AVE. He drove slowly by the core businesses: a hardware, drugstore, post office, two cafés, a bank, dime store, tavern, coin laundry, mortuary, J. SERNA INSURANCE, a few inactive storefronts, and then, SERNA & LE BLANC, ATTORNEYS. Soaped onto the next window, *CAMBIO DINERO* was the only Spanish besides surnames.

"I see Sernas, but no Ortegas," Jake said.

"Except the supermarket, the Ortegas are more involved in the professions and government—and the schools, of course. The mayor is Serna, but the Ortegas and Montalvos have more votes on the Council."

Jake saw that the block ahead was much different. Bright advertisements in Spanish for dry goods and currency exchange predominated the signage at the last stores before Mexico. After that, two lanes of slow traffic passed a grey structure with five limp flags—three stair-stepped Old Glories, and the Arizona and Mexican flags hanging below.

At the last side street, Jesús turned right, then right again past a one-story yellow brick City Hall building, a vintage black and white squad car parked out front. He saluted with a chuckle, then drove through blocks of poor clapboard houses behind downtown.

Jesús came to a sign for PARK ST., which was wider than International Avenue, and newly paved. He turned left and started up a hill. After two blocks, the older houses gave way to about ten acres of municipal park, then a few middle-income homes. LA CHOLLA SUPER FOODS and its parking lot took up the entire top of the hill.

“So much for driving north for groceries,” Jake said to Tina, who just nodded. He turned to Jesús. “I don’t see Ortega written on the market, either.”

Jesús shook his head. “My great-uncle—he never does that. His old store was downtown; the Sernas fought him about moving it up here. They wanted it over on the next hill, but my tío wanted it right here in between.”

“In between what?”

“I’ll show you.” He took the next street down into a valley of bungalows not quite as old as the houses near downtown. They gained altitude on the other side, driving up to a block of three-bedroom ramblers and functional two-stories.

“Okay,” Jesús said, “this is the low-rent side of the Gardens; the Sernas wanted the market over here.” At the top of the hill, he turned right on GARDEN DR. and stopped at a black-fenced subdivision with a flower bed surrounding its entrance sign:

LA CHOLLA GARDENS
NO TRESPASSING

Fifty yards or so away, acres of lawn surrounded the first home, a tri-level professionally landscaped English Tudor. Jesús pointed beyond the big house. “Maybe six or seven finished places up in there. A hundred and fifty thousand bucks, at least.”

“Serna and friends?” Jake asked.

“Mostly. That’s the biggest one, right there. Frankie Serna—he’s a lawyer.” He glanced up at Tina in his rearview. “Want to see the rest?”

“No, thanks. Jesús, do you mind if I ask you something personal?”

“Fire away.”

“Does Nora talk at home?”

“That’s a first.” He seemed wistful. “It’s always her leg people ask about.” Jesús cut the motor; he turned to Tina. “She speaks at home, especially with Ana and me, and in Spanish with her abuelita.”

Tina's jaw dropped before she spoke. "Both languages?"

"Yes, she understands everything. When she goes out, Nora stops speaking unless she's sure no strangers are around. Hardly says a word in the restaurant."

"How old is she?" Tina asked.

"Just turned six; she's repeating Kinder."

"They've already processed her for special education?"

"Yes, tests, meetings, all that."

Tina thought for a moment. "What did they say she's going to be served for?"

"In general, both physical and mental disability."

Jake had been staring at a perfect bed of white petunias that surrounded the entrance sign, but he was attentive to their conversation before he turned and saw Tina shaking her head in disgust. "Tina's already in teaching mode," he said, attempting humor, but she and Jesús remained serious. *Shut up, Jake.*

"Do you mind telling me about her leg, Jesús?" Tina asked.

"Of course not, maestra." He pushed up the brim of his cap and gazed out. "Nora was born with spina bifida, a relatively mild case, thank God, but with neurological damage and partial paralysis of the left leg. She's had that clunky brace more than a year; I guess it stabilizes her some." He looked in the rear-view again. "They don't agree with me, but I think the brace makes her shyness worse, and I see no improvement when she has it off."

As Tina was thinking, Jake saw fervor in her eyes. "I'll tell you this much," she said, "it's obvious that something isn't right with the school's part in this. After we settle in, I'll begin a reevaluation."

Jesús grinned. "Don't get in trouble now."

"I won't." Tina was still solemn. "I know a little about shyness, how our culture demeans it, but it's not abnormal unless there's constant self-isolation."

"Nora was actually early with her first words, and she wasn't all that late walking. She had it all figured out, then just stopped, maybe when she realized she was different; I don't know. It took six weeks before she walked again." He sighed heavily and started the motor. "I guess we've all been over-protective."

Jesús flicked his radio onto some low static, then turned back onto Garden Drive, away from downtown. "Our two oldest boys, the twins, are eleven now; our youngest boy—" He turned off the radio. "Sorry, bad habit." Jesús looked up at Tina. "Anyway, Nora's first school year was pretty rough—all those strangers, and our boys got in fights when someone made fun of her. It's hard for our boys to understand that the fighting just makes Nora more self-conscious."

“Sounds to me like they have a real good dad,” Jake said matter-of-factly as Jesús approached a one-story professional building with a manicured lawn out front.

“We do our best.” He sighed again and pointed to the offices. “Both doctors are in there. Oh, and our dentist—another tío of mine.” Jesús drove on, descending past a few tidy mid-income homes into a valley with the largest building they had seen in La Cholla.

The hospital had two wings, one made of red brick and perpendicular to a shorter wood-framed addition, which had a recent coat of reddish-brown paint. Like the modest homes across the street, the hospital grounds showed no evidence of the desert, just grass, flowers, and a few mature trees. A life-size white statue of Jesus with outstretched arms stood in the lawn by the newer wing and its attached modular building, where a tall sign proclaimed EMERGENCY in plastic red letters.

A fifteen-foot white cross imbedded in plate glass formed the A-frame façade of the hospital, the vertical line of the crucifix dissecting the double front doors. Enduring time, weather, and birds, a grey statue of Mary holding baby Jesus stood to the left of the entrance.

“*Santa Concepción.*” Jake read aloud a painted wooden sign over the doors; it actually said, SAINT CONCEPCION.

“Yeah, Saint Connie’s. Our boys were all born here.”

“And Nora?” Tina asked.

“The university.” Jesús stopped near the entrance.

“With all that glass, it looks like the addition must have been pretty expensive at the time,” Jake said.

“My dad told me they had quite a fight about it thirty years ago. The other ward back there is over sixty years old; some said it was good enough; others wanted progress, and now they want a new building again.”

Tina leaned forward. “Jesús, can we take a quick look inside?”

“Not much to see, but sure.” He parked the squad car right out front; they walked below the cross into an inactive lobby. The layout was simple: a small chapel and a tiny admissions office next to the information/security counter, and three couches on each side. The closest hallway went straight ahead; the one to the left also went straight, then jutted off to the old brick wing. A girl in her early teens waited on a far sofa, reading a magazine.

Jesús waved to the receptionist/operator and a silver-haired man next to her who was wearing an ordinary white dress shirt with a security patch sewn crookedly onto one of his short sleeves. “Jesse,” the man shouted for some reason; Jesús nodded and smiled back. Tina took the lead, walking ahead under the sign that said:

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

PATIENT ROOMS 111 – 118 / MATERNITY

ADMINISTRATION / LABS / EMERGENCY

“They call you Jesse?” Jake asked Jesús.

“In town they do, ever since school.”

They walked down the hall by four vacant rooms. The floors shone and the powder blue paint looked recent, but there were drooping electric cords near the ceiling, where brown watermarks resembled continents on an old map. Jake noticed the antiseptic odor was more pungent than in most hospitals; to cover up a lot of old smells, he decided. The only religious trappings he saw were two unimposing crucifixes and an eight-by-twelve-inch portrait of Mary and baby Jesus.

A young red-haired nurse smiled to them as she walked by in light blue hospital scrubs. They came to a see-through room at an intersection of hallways. The crossing corridor connected the old wing from the left to administration and emergency to the right. Inside the nursery's glass walls, they saw five empty incubators and no staff.

“The four maternity rooms are ahead,” Jesús said. “That's about it, unless you want to go down to emergency or over to the old wing.”

“No, that's good, thanks.” Tina said, turning back, the men on either side. “Jesús, it doesn't seem, uh, very busy.”

“It is at times; the diocese keeps the place afloat because it serves so many poor people. Years ago, the nurses were mostly nuns—low overhead, I guess. They only have two now, the administrator, Sister Ruth, and another one who minds the chapel.”

They came back to the lobby and walked out. “Okay,” Jesús said, “I'll show you the schools and the district office—just a few blocks from here.” They got back in the squad car; he drove up yet another hill past a bright orange and black twelve-by-eight-foot billboard:

NEXT RIGHT

LA CHOLLA HIGH SCHOOL

HOME OF THE TIGERS

STATE CHAMPS

1957 & 1963 A FOOTBALL

1974 GIRLS A BASKETBALL

“Gotta hand it to those girls; we had to repaint that old sign.” Jesús made a turn onto level ground to a campus of three veteran red brick buildings and a newer one built to match. The schools were separated by asphalt and grass, including some mature willows like the one in Sofia. The nearby building was an old two-story high school built around a gymnasium.

Jesús pointed ahead to the new school, the only one with parked vehicles. “That’s your building, Tina. K-three, and the district offices are on the far end. Do you want to go in or see more of the town? Whatever you’d like.”

Jake glanced at the dashboard. “It’s almost four; I guess we should get the dog and start thinking about finding some place that’ll take her tonight.” He turned to Tina; she nodded back.

“Don’t want to be pushy,” Jesús said, “but I think we’ve got that handled for you.”

17

That evening, the Friends met Ana, a slight woman whose long hair and black eyes shone like obsidian as she calmly took charge of the seven-table restaurant and put her three extroverted sons to work. Ana prepared the chimichangas like beef or chicken burritos, except fried in lard to a light crisp, then covered with lettuce, salsa, and crumbly white cotija cheese. She used homemade flour tortillas the diameter of pizzas; Jake could barely finish one, and Tina, of course, saved half of hers for the next day.

Emilio's wife, Alicia, whom Jake and Tina had only seen behind the screen door, came by to help Ana. Her hair completely grey, Alicia was much shorter and more wizened than Emilio, although she seemed healthy. Another half-dozen members of the extended family came in after five, most of them helping Ana before they ate.

When Jake noticed there were few paying customers, he realized Tuesday wasn't a regular night; they had opened just for them. The dinner transitioned into an evening-long casual fiesta with more friends and relatives from Sofia and La Cholla dropping in for coconut agua, beer, food, and to meet the new teachers.

Ana was still frying chimichangas after eight o'clock, showing Tina how to make them. With Nora clutching her apron, Ana explained to her daughter how busy she was and that maybe Tina could read to her. The child's eyes, dark as her mother's, focused on Tina. Nora smiled and took Tina's hand, leading her through the restaurant and into the house.

Nora brushed her teeth, changed to pajamas, and brought a dolly and a stack of worn Doctor Seuss books to Tina at the small bed in her alcove-like room.

"I just happen to know all of these, Nora. Which one should we start with?"

Nora held out the most faded and threadbare of the lot, *And to Think that I*

Saw it on Mulberry Street. “This one is my favorite,” Nora said, opening the cover eagerly as if to hear the story for the first time.

Determined to hold back tears brought on by this so-called mentally disabled child, Tina smiled and started to read.

After Tina rejoined the adults, one of the uncles brought out his guitar and started everyone singing. The party broke up later after the tío taught Jake some lyrics to *Malagueña Salerosa* and the two of them sang a slow, sentimental and inebriated version of the old love song.

The Friends were escorted to a spare room in Emilio’s house fifty yards away while Fiera stayed with Rosalinda at her house somewhere off in the tall palo verde.

“Are you always such a happy drinker?” Tina asked Jake from the bed as he finally settled to remove his shoes.

“What? I guess so.”

“You don’t ever get depressed or, uh, angry?”

“Not angry anyway. Why?” He took off his shirt.

“I’m just a little bit worried about you.”

“I know what an alky is, Tina; my dad’s family taught me well.” He pinched his two-inch fat roll, grinning. “Check this, maybe I have been overdoing it a little.”

“Okay, get your tubby ol’ self in this bed.”

While breakfasting the next morning on eggs, fruit, and reheated cheese enchiladas, Jake and Tina heard from Emilio that his grandson, Juanito, Rosalinda’s father, had three small rentals. After Emilio told them that one place would be available when they returned from California, Alicia came over from the kitchen to whisper something to her husband.

“You two have a visitor,” Emilio said. Jake, nursing a headache, went to the door with Tina to find Fiera curled up on the porch; the Friends had a good laugh over their loyal mutt.

After Emilio left for work, Alicia came along to guide Loretta about forty yards into the bush to Juanito’s place. Nora was already there with Rosalinda; the two cousins were halfway up the driveway as if they were starting to leave.

“I’m so sorry,” Rosalinda said to Jake, nearly crying. “We just now found Fiera was gone.”

Tina, sitting in back with the dog, opened the door; Fiera leaped out to lick the girls. “Don’t worry, *Rosita*,” Tina called, “we should’ve told you to tie her up.”

Rosalinda pointed back at her house, which had a five-foot adobe wall all the way around. “See my daddy’s big fence? I didn’t think she could get out.”

"It's okay, *mija*," Tina said. "She can get out of anywhere."

"I'm not in trouble then?"

Tina shook her head reassuringly. "Of course not. Hop in and show us the way to the rental." After the girls and Fiera got in back, Rosalinda began begging the Friends to rent the house, citing all the possibilities for visits and dog-sitting. Jake followed her animated directions through the underbrush to yet another small cinder-block house in a clearing. He stopped and ran around the front of the truck to help Alicia get down from the high front seat.

As they walked, the old woman said, "Sorry, no key," in English; Rosalinda told them her dad's painter had it. They looked in the windows at the cottage's gleaming off-white living room walls; the compact kitchen was cluttered with ladders, tarps, and paint cans. Tina and Jake spoke for a moment, then told Alicia they would love to rent it. A cheer from Rosalinda and a squeal from Nora followed, which brought a surprised chuckle from their *abuelita*.

"*Emilio told Juanito he would not send teachers again to rent,*" Alicia said in Spanish, the first full sentence she spoke to them, her words slurred by loose dentures.

Jake raised his brows. "*¿Por qué, señora?*"

"*They ruined this house like the school.* But he likes you two," she added in English, turning back. She took Rosalinda's hand; Nora had already latched onto Tina's.



The Friends' original plan was to make their move to Arizona in August, but after renting the house in Sofia, they decided to return as soon as they could. While Jake and Tina were gone, Fiera would stay with Rosalinda, an arrangement that seemed to please all concerned.

They made it back to Sofia the last week of July, Jake in a small rental truck and Tina driving Loretta. As they began to get things squared away, the relentless hundred-degree heat bothered both of them, especially Jake, but he soon adjusted with the help of the shady oak tree out front and a wheezing swamp cooler that kept the living room in the eighties during the day.

As for Fiera, she found relief in the shade on the back veranda in her drinking bucket, an ordinary mopping pail. She had figured out how to stuff her entire back end into the water, her two front paws out on the concrete slab. She sat there minutes at a time, tongue hanging out, and occasionally lapping water from around her hard belly.

Every evening at dusk when the heat broke somewhat, the desert began to crawl with tarantulas, an occasional diamondback rattler or giant centipede, and worst of all, scorpions as common as stink bugs. The tarantulas were by far the most docile of these, often walking right by Fiera, who would follow them for a while until she became bored. After getting nipped by a scorpion, the dog decided they were worthy of barking, which was fine with Jake, who told Tina he could deal with the spiders and snakes but admitted the scorpions “creeped him out.”

One sweltering night that first week, they were lying on top of the sheets in their underwear, reading. Jake was trying to ignore the squadrons of June bugs, mantises, moths and unidentified flying creatures bouncing off the screens of the bedroom windows. He turned and spotted a striped-tail scorpion over their heads on the wall. Jake sprang right to the floor yelling, “Damn it!”

Tina sat up and saw the arachnid above, motionless, as if it had been watching them read. “We’ll have to kill it, Jake; we can’t leave it wandering around in here.”

“No shit.” He was surprised by the pique in his voice. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Damn thing must be four inches long.”

“I don’t think so.” Tina tried not to smile. “You want me to do it?”

The scorpion hadn’t moved. “No, I’ll handle it.”

“You don’t have to prove anything; I’m glad you don’t kill things.”

“I never said I wouldn’t kill something that was after us.” He kept one eye on the scorpion as he looked around for a potential weapon. “I’m going out to get something.”

It took less than a minute for him to return from the veranda with a garden shovel and a push broom. She was looking in the closet.

“What happened, Tina?” Jake pushed two boxes out of the way.

“I tried to squash it with a book. I hit it hard, but it just fell off and ran in here.”

“Why didn’t you wait?”

“Sorry. I didn’t think it was that hard to kill.”

“Man, no one can accuse you of being squeamish.”

“Been around bugs and varmints all my life, Jake.”

He knelt in front of the closet and started taking out shoes, one at a time, with the broom. As he carefully pulled things out using his left arm, Jake held the shovel above with his right, ready to flatten the formidable little beast. He kept working cautiously for at least ten minutes—no sign of the scorpion. “Nothing else I can take out; now we just wait.”

“Jake, it’s late. Let’s sleep in the other bedroom.”

“It might just walk right in there.”

“I doubt it. I’m going to bed.”

“Fine. I’m staying here.”

To make Jake’s vigil more comfortable, Tina brought him a kitchen stool before she went to bed. He put a lamp near the closet for more light and waited on the stool, shovel at the ready. He kept watch for a while before he started to nod off. After the third or fourth time that Jake woke himself, the creature was there, on the wall in the closet. He stood up stealthily, swung the shovel, but only dealt the scorpion a glancing blow; it fell to the floor and fled. From overhead, Jake came straight down on it, screaming “Eyah!” as the steel shovel clanged on the floor. He repeated the assault three times, “Eyah! Eyah! Eyah!”

Tina stood at the door. “I think you got it, Jake.”

“What? Yeah—little bastard.” He took a deep breath. “Jesus, I really wanted to get it, didn’t I?”

Tina grinned. “Thanks for rescuing me, Don Joaquín.”

He stared at the little mess. “Yeah, funny. Talk about overkill.”

“Can we go to bed now?”

The next day, as they got ready to leave, he asked her not to tell any of the locals about his scorpion hunt. Tina said she would save the little drama for Hannah’s visit at Thanksgiving.

“Drama?”

“Yeah—Hiyah! Hiyah! Hiyah!”

“Hilarious.” He chuckled with her on the way out the door.

During their second week in Sofia, the dry, hot mornings continued, but thunderheads formed in the nearby hills in the afternoons, making each day progressively more humid. The monsoonal electrical storms came close enough twice to bring them some brief respite from the heat.

One afternoon, while tossing emptied boxes onto the veranda, Jake saw slate clouds building to the southwest. He brought Tina out to see the lightning bolts arc and stitch between the leaden thunderheads and a hilly horizon. They stood there for a couple of minutes in their tees, shorts and sneakers, watching the storm intensify.

“Pretty far away, we’ll probably miss the brunt of it again,” Jake said. “Where’s Fiera?”

“Already under the bed.” They turned to go back inside but heard a low rumble behind them, in the opposite direction from the storm.

Jake turned around. “Is that water?”

“Maybe; I don’t know.” They walked out across the veranda into the dirt back yard and started toward the noise. Jake had his trusty shovel, using it as a cumbersome hiking stick.

“In case of a scorpion, Jake?”

“Right, smart aleck,” he answered with a grin.

The desert was nearly lush with new growth, and more of the cacti were blooming. Jake stopped to show her one kind he had recently discovered. It was called the “hedgehog,” a squat succulent with lavender-pink flowers.

They walked on, heading for the noise and passing a tall mesquite. After weaving around palo verde and some grey ironwood, they came to an ocotillo more than twice Jake’s height. Each of its lanky, spiny arms had small red blossoms at the tip.

“I didn’t know these bloomed,” he said, not paying much attention to some loud thunder behind them.

“Such delicate little flowers.”

“Yeah. The noise is that way.” He pointed past more tall stands of palo verde, which they circumvented before stopping again to listen.

“It *is* water, Jake—rushing water.”

They walked quickly out to the edge of the bluff and looked down into Sofia Wash, churning from side to side with at least four feet of brownish-grey, sludgy run-off. All sizes and shapes of limbs, even a few logs, bobbed in and out of the swift current.

Jake pitched a stick into the current and watched it vanish. “Man, wouldn’t want to be standing there when that first came through.”

“Look at this.” She pointed upstream to a blue plastic kiddie pool that sailed by in seconds. “The wash must come right from the hills.”

They heard louder thunder, and turned to the storm; a cool breeze blew in their faces. The steel grey clouds had boiled higher in the sky and moved much closer. Jake’s peripheral vision spotted something, a white milk carton floating by in the flood. He let go of the shovel, picked up some rocks and managed to throw two of them at the target before it was gone.

“You almost hit it.”

“Not really.” A loud crack seemed to rip the atmosphere not far behind; Tina and Jake turned into another wave of air, this time it smelled of damp dirt. “Jesus, how could it be that clo—” A roll of thunder obliterated Jake’s last word, wobbling the ground. “It’s moving fast.” He picked up the shovel. “Let’s head back.”

At first, they just walked from the bluff toward the menacing dark front, thinking they still had time since the sun shone brightly behind them. After another fifty feet or so, Jake’s toes tingled, then his legs.

"You feel that?" Tina asked, but before he answered, lightning and thunder crack-boomed simultaneously, electrifying their arm hair. The white bolt appeared to strike near the house; burnt ozone touched their nostrils as the first heavy drops splattered onto the ground.

"¡*Vámanos!*" he shouted; they took off running, Tina in front and Jake lurching along with the shovel. The downpour turned ferocious, striking the ground so hard that the rain ricocheted, spraying up to their bare knees as they ran through the brush. With each zap of lightning, Tina and Jake retracted their necks involuntarily like turtles. Jake yelped once between the strikes; she looked at him quizzically, but they kept going and scurried onto the veranda, completely sopped.

"Thank God the lightning didn't hit here," Tina shouted over the deluge slamming onto the veranda's metal roof. She pulled her drenched hair back and watched the curtain of rain.

Tossing the shovel away, Jake looked immediately at his hand. "Piss up a rope, dumber than the dog."

"What's wrong?" She turned to him and saw a hunk of cholla wedged into the palm of his left hand.

"Barely touched it; Fiera was supposed to be the first one to do this," he called back.

"How do you get it out?" she shouted over the racket, a bit of panic in her voice.

"Emilio said to use pliers."

"Pliers? Shouldn't you go to a doctor?"

"Only if I can't get it all out."

They went into the kitchen and found the toolbox. Jake took some locking pliers and poked the branch to see if the spines were deeply imbedded. "Ouch, damn it."

"Can you do it?"

"I think so. Find the scissors, okay?" She brought them; Jake cut out the cactus parts not in contact with his skin. Six quills remained, practically sewn into the adipose tissue between his thumb and forefinger. He sat at the kitchen table and yanked them out one by one, grumbling an oath with each spine he freed. Tina puttered around with salve, sympathy and antiseptic until he finished the extractions.

The rain had completely stopped, but they heard a second storm approaching from a different direction. Tina checked on Fiera in the guest bedroom, then joined Jake in their room, where he was opening the windows. They took off all their wet clothes and got under the sheet to listen to the next storm.

“Enjoy this cool air while you can, Tina.”

“How’s your hand?”

“It’s fine now—had a good nurse.”

“Oh sure.”

“I did.” He leaned over; they kissed on the lips. He released; she put her damp head on his shoulder. Jake cupped a breast, his member poking her in the leg.

“My, my, that was a quick recovery, Don Joaquín.”

“I guess so.” He kissed Tina on the nape, tickling her into a slight shiver.

“Before you get too friendly, find one of your little plastic hats; I’m not equipped.”

“Man, that sure breaks the mood.”

“A few more weeks, amor.”

“Right, I know. Now don’t go anywhere, cutie.” He tossed back the sheet and rushed to the bathroom.

18

That fall, Tina and Jake saw why new retirement communities were developing in the desert. The weather was Chamber-of-Commerce-perfect week after week; some of the insects, arachnids, and snakes hibernated or died, and most of the mammals and birds they wanted to see were still around. The mountains north of Tucson were another bonus; Tina and Jake camped up there twice over fall weekends to enjoy the bright foliage and snow neither of them had experienced much as children.

Jon Munz turned out to be somewhat of a surprise to Jake. The supervisor agreed to almost everything his new teacher wanted to do, especially if minimal cost was involved. As anticipated, Munz was often content to leave the program in Sofia to fend for itself, but not out of laziness, Jake decided. The administrator just seemed to have a lot of confidence in the school's small staff.

In August, they had interviewed Rosa Méndez, an accomplished teacher of science and math who was tired of living in Phoenix. To hire her, Munz and Jake had to outvote the high-school principal, who preferred an applicant with coaching experience.

After Jake and Rosa spent weeks sorting, discarding and reorganizing, they set up the program so she could teach her strong subjects to all grades; Jake would do the same with Language Arts and Social Studies. They taught ESL as a part of content classes; Jake did the P.E., and Rosa alternated music and art. For her first art project, Jake got permission from Munz for Emilio to adjust his duties so he could volunteer an hour each day to guide Rosa and the students in revamping the hallway mural.

Jake made a point of not asking for money until he had to have it, but he soon discovered a glaring educational gap for youth who worked during the day. Munz came through again, tapping into federal Migrant funds so they could offer ESL and high school equivalency preparation on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Rosa and Jake would start the new program in early

November; he gave it an acronym, MAPAS, which stood for Migrant Alternative Program at Sofia. Tina was also going to be involved, volunteering for some Thursday nights, and the program gave Jake five hours of extra salary they would need, as it turned out.

Just after Halloween, a few days before MAPAS started, Tina felt sure enough to tell Jake that she was pregnant. He was usually home first on Fridays, but Tina arrived early from La Cholla in the old Opel Kadett they had bought from a lot in Tucson. She prepared dinner, trying Ana's recipe for lemon pastry, and hesitantly told Jake the news after they ate.

Jake gave her a cursory hug and sat down. "Man, I didn't expect that. You sounded like you had bad news."

"You don't seem very excited about it either."

"Uh, how long have you suspected?" he asked, ignoring his second helping of dessert.

"A while, but I wanted to be pretty sure."

"Are you past where you were the second time?"

"I think so; I haven't seen anyone yet." Tina paused. "Listen to us; we're both so cold about it." Tears welled up in her eyes. "I wasn't going to cry—shoot."

He reached across the table. "Sorry, Latina."

She sobbed, holding his fingers firmly. "There's nothing to be sorry about. You're afraid of what might happen; so am I."

Jake got up and pulled his chair next to Tina's. He put a napkin in her hands, and then held her.

"*Gracias, amor*. I'm okay," she said, wiping the last of the moisture from her face as he let go. "We have to talk about this." Tina made a long sniff, determined to put the crying behind her. "If we make it this time until I start to show, that's when I want to tell people. Except maybe Hannah at Thanksgiving."

"Sure, that's a good idea. What about a doctor?"

"I don't know. The university is so far; we came here to be part of a community."

"And remember our insurance only covers complications. We could probably afford the university hospital, but not the specialists."

"It's good we have two salaries."

"We still might have to borrow. If we use Saint Connie's, Jesús said Doctor McNally is, uh, sort of over the hill—that just leaves Serna's nephew."

Tina nodded. "I heard he went to a top medical school; knows all the latest."

"That's something, I guess; he's only been practicing a couple of years. Remember him at the Superintendent's party—the frat boy?"

"Yes, but I don't think he's much like his uncle."

"God, I hope not."

"Maybe I'll give him a try; see how it goes. I'm going to wait another week or two."

"Okay. Can I ask you something about that, Tina?"

"Of course, but about what exactly?"

"Male doctors. Do they bring a nurse in for, uh, O.B. exams?"

She forced air through her teeth, a scoff for her. "Usually not."

"Well, they should. I suppose you don't want me to come to the appointment."

"You can if you want, but I think they'll ask you to stay in the office."

"That doesn't make sense; I'd refuse."

"Maybe you'd better not go then."

"Okay, maybe not for the first one."

"Everything will probably be okay. If not, we'll just have to find a family doctor near the university."



Most of the ten students who began MAPAS at night were sixteen-to-twenty-year-olds from rural Sonora who worked the fields or warehouses in the U.S., living on their own or with relatives. All of them were Mexican citizens; three had completed only primary school, the rest attended or graduated from secondary. Two exceptions were the Hernandez brothers from Mexico City, college prep graduates, twenty and eighteen years old, who lived with their parents and only worked in the summer. All of the first MAPAS students were male, except for one popular and closely guarded twin sister.

On the second night of MAPAS, Jake was at his desk, grading and monitoring practice exams for four students; the rest were in ESL in Rosa's room. A young man walked in with a binder, but he stopped, almost cowering, just inside the door. The others glanced up and went back to their tests.

The new student was an inch or so taller than Jake and so thin his blue flannel shirt and faded jeans sagged from his lanky frame, making him appear more destitute than he probably was. His sneakers were ragged but in one piece and he wore a sweat-stained white baseball hat with a HAWAII 5-0 rainbow on the front. The young man's face and neck were very dark, a combination of genetics and years in the sun, Jake thought, smiling to him.

Solemnly, the newcomer approached, pushing dark brown hair from his forehead. “¿Maestro?” he asked quietly.

“Sí, soy maestro Friend. ¿Cómo te llamas?”

“I am *Benjamín Soto*. I can study here?”

The older of the light-skinned Hernandez brothers from Mexico City, Justino, sniggered and said, “*Mojado*” in a low voice. The other students kept working, and the Soto boy also ignored Justino.

Jake stood up to shake hands. “Good to meet you. If you’re under twenty-one, you can study here.”

“I am nineteen, maestro.”

“Okay. Should I call you Ben?” The young man nodded; Jake reached into a tray on his desk and gave him a registration form. “Fill this out, please; let me know if you have questions.” Ben sat and started writing; Jake checked the clock. “Okay, guys, time’s up—take your break, except Justino; I need to see you.”

Justino Hernandez adjusted the collar of his silky royal blue dress shirt while his brother, Ricardo, left with the others, shaking his head. Jake led Justino to the far end of the room, well away from Ben.

“You know why I told you to stay?” Jake asked, just above a whisper. Justino looked sullenly away and ran a comb once through his slick auburn hair. “Answer me,” Jake said flatly.

“I know nothing,” he grumbled in his heavy accent.

“Yeah, Justino, for a guy who I know is smart, sometimes you act like you know nothing.” Jake’s voice was still low; Justino just scowled at a map on the wall. “In this school, you don’t call anybody *mojado*; you show respect for the other students.”

He turned to Jake, his teeth clenched. “Wetbacks get no respect of me.”

“Guess I can’t change that, but here’s the deal: If you want to stay here and get your diploma, then you leave him alone. Is that clear?”

“Sí.” Justino looked away, pouting.

“Good. Go on out.” Justino left; Jake walked back over to Ben.

“Maestro, the address and *teléfono*—it’s my uncle. *Mi papá*, he look for a house.”

“That’s fine, Ben, tell me if it changes. All right, let’s see.” Jake took the form and looked at it. “Okay, you finished eight years in Hermosillo; two in La Cholla. How did you learn so much English?”

Ben removed a dog-eared tourist dictionary from his back pocket. “I study this; listen to American radio in the night. I want my English, uh, to be more good.”

"You're doing very well; you'll be in the advanced class second hour, with those boys who just left."

"¿*Avanzado?* I need the first class, no?"

"We only have two levels; you'll be fine in there."

"*Gracias, maestro.*" He pointed at the exams. "What they doing?"

Jake explained how they were studying for their high school equivalency degree. ". . . and you can too, Ben."

"Yes, I want this very much."

Within a week, it became obvious to Jake that Ben Soto would become the top student in the MAPAS program. Ben said math was his best subject; he took that exam first, passing it easily, which peeved Justino Hernandez, who had already cleared all the practice exams except for math.

The Tuesday evening before Thanksgiving, Jake was excited about Hannah's visit but miffed because the holiday would interrupt MAPAS just as the students were settling in. He was administering a practice test to two students while the others studied. Ben, who was absent for the first time, finally walked in quietly at break, holding a plastic sack full of bread.

"Hey, miss your ride?" Jake asked; Ben just looked around the empty room. He walked to the reading area, held aside Jake's bottle cap curtains and saw Justino on the couch, flipping disinterestedly through a magazine.

"¡*Soplón!*" Ben shouted, dropping the bag to go after him. By the time Jake rushed through the curtains, Ben held the smaller Justino down by the shoulders on the sofa, cursing him.

"Ben, stop!" Jake yelled, pulling him off. The moment he was free, Justino yanked a knife from his pocket. He pointed it at Ben; a long blade sprang from the handle.

"*Goddamn mojado,*" Justino snarled, standing up, but Jake stayed between them.

"*Pinche soplón,*" Ben said, spitting his words and pointing at Justino as Jake held him back.

"¡*Cálmate!*" Jake ordered Ben, who slowly lowered his arm, glaring at his adversary. Jake turned to Justino. "You're pointing that damn thing at me now. Put it down."

"The *pendejo* jump *me*, man."

"Yeah, but not with a knife. He gets suspended, but unless you want to deal with the cops, put it down."

Justino sneered, closing the knife into his pocket. He walked for the door. "*Mi papá, maestro,* he gonna come."

"Fine, I want to see him; I'll need that knife before you come in this school again."

Justino pushed his way past the others as they walked back in. Ben picked up his plastic bag.

“Get your things, guys, and go to English,” Jake told the group. After they left, Jake and Ben went out in the hall and stood below the mural. “What’s going on, Ben? First, what’s a *soplón*?”

Ben leaned back against the wall, whisking away strands of hair. *Este soplón nos rateó a la migra.*”

A *snitch*. “He turned in your family?”

“*Sí. Mi papá, my uncle and aunt, and their children—all deported,*” he said in Spanish. “*Ricardo told me. He hates his own brother.*”

Some students came down the hall; Ben took a deep breath. Jake told his new group to go in and study for their next exam; he turned back to Ben. “Okay, so when did Immigration come?”

Calmer now, Ben switched to English. “I go for *pan* in the morning.” He held up the sack of bread. “When I come back, the neighbor tell me what happen. I hide; wait for my friend and go work.”

“What will you do now?”

“*Mi papá*, I think he stay in *México*; he is here only for me to study. My uncle—*sus niños son americanos*—he come back after the Christmas, I think.”

“When he returns, can you stay with him?”

“Yes, but I think I am problem for my uncle; maybe I go back to stay in *México*.”

“You want to study here, right?”

Ben frowned. “*Sí, maestro*, but the fight—*Justino*.”

“Yeah, you did the wrong thing, but he pulled that stupid knife; he’s in more trouble. You’re suspended three days—today, tomorrow and Friday.”

“The class is only today.”

“Funny how that works on Thanksgiving. Where are your things?”

“Only this now.” Ben pathetically lifted the bag of bread. “They close the house, but I can find the key. After two, three days, I go back late in the night.”

“Where will you stay?”

“My friend at work, maybe.”

“I have an idea. See what you think.”

19

While Jake's situation with Jon Munz worked out well, Tina's principal was an ambitious new administrator, a former high school math teacher with aspirations to be a superintendent in some big city. After his first official visit, he told Tina that her discipline was a bit lax. At the post-observation, he said her lesson lacked "large-group instruction" and needed more "measurable goals." She knew he was spouting his internship pedagogy and didn't understand what took place in her class. Try as she did to restrain her emotions, a tear escaped one eye; she apologized and dried her face. To his credit, the novice principal asked Tina to describe her methods.

She explained how each student had a separate learning plan. While they did have large-group work, it was the exception, and they measured success more by observed accomplishments than testing. Tina, her two aides, a nurse who was there for one boy, and her parent volunteers sometimes ran what seemed like a circus, she admitted, but they provided a specialized "ring" where each child could learn. The principal insisted that she commit to a goal of more large-group instruction, but he didn't show up in her room again for weeks.

Though Nora was happy in school and a helper for the other students, Tina began the promised reevaluation of the child's educational program. It took until Thanksgiving week for Tina to complete the paperwork and confer with the psychologist, her principal, Munz, Jesús, and Ana. After a Tuesday afternoon meeting with all of them, Tina also had her first appointment with Doctor Serna.

She got home from the doctor's after six, checked the thawing turkey in the sink, and ate an apple to hold her over until eight-fifteen, when she expected Jake to get home from MAPAS. Ana had given her some chicken tamales, one of Jake's favorites; Tina put a few in to steam at eight o'clock. She chopped fruit, took out a chilled bottle of his favorite Mexican beer, and even lit two candles.

When Jake called to say he'd be late, Tina put away the food and sat in their small living room, overcome by a crying jag. He came home before nine thirty, saw the extinguished candles and went into the bedroom to find her lying on the bed in school clothes, facing the wall.

"Tina, I'm sorry. We had some problems tonight."

"What happened?" she asked around a telltale sniff.

"You've been crying."

"What else is new," she stated coldly.

"Something go wrong at the doctor's?"

Tina turned to him. "No, it went okay. The due date is June twentieth." Her frown morphed into a brief grin. "We're pretty fertile; it's a bit earlier than we planned."

Jake sat, taking her hand. "Yeah, but it'll work."

"I'll just be huge by the time school's out."

"What did he say about the baby?"

"Everything seems fine."

"Well, that's all good news then, right?"

"M-hm. I asked about miscarriage; he said it's not likely, though still possible."

"That's great, Latina." They hugged a few moments; he let go. "I blew it; you were going to celebrate, candles and everything. No wonder you were crying; I'm sorry."

"No, something else got to me. I'm sure you had no control over what happened, whatever it was."

Jake winced. "A fight, believe it or not; the last thing I expected from these kids."

"Everybody's okay?"

"Yeah, later for that." He took her hand again. "Did Serna upset you?"

"No. He was actually very professional, up-to-date, but, uh . . ."

"Yes?"

"You were right; he sure plays up the phony bedside manner, but I think I trust him to do his job."

"You said he was professional. How did he act when, he, uh, exam—"

"No problems there, Jake—very respectful."

"Good. What did he say about me being with you for the birth?"

"Saint Connie's doesn't allow it."

He let go of her and stood up, scowling. "Jesus, some places encourage it now." Jake leaned on the wall, folding his arms.

"I know; I doubt they've even considered it. So, do you think we should go to the university?"

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

"If we stay here, I'll do what I can, but you're the one who'd have to deal with them the most." Jake sighed. "Maybe that old emergency doc in Visalia would like to semi-retire in Shangri-Village."

"He was so good," Tina said, ignoring the ridiculousness of Jake's comment. She sat up on the bed. "Maybe we'll feel better about everything after a couple more months. If not, there's still time to change."

"Yeah, the next appointment should tell you more. Since that went okay, what was it that upset you today?"

"Nora's meeting." She stood up. "Let's go to the kitchen; we can share our little disasters over some fruit."

They walked out; Jake got a beer while Tina dished up some pico de gallo similar to what they ate on the beach in San Diego. They sat at their small kitchen table; Jake forked a hunk of jícama, dipping it in the spicy juice.

He inserted the cube into his mouth. "Dli-shus."

"Good. Should I heat up the tamales?"

"No thanks, I ate something at school."

Tina pushed her fruit around with the spoon. "Well, Munz turned out to be a savior again."

"How's that?" He took a swig of his Bohemia.

"My principal said January before Nora could move to a regular first grade; the rooms are full. I told them how much I enjoy Nora, but how wrong it is for her to wait; that she reads, for God's sake—I didn't say it like that. Anyway, Munz was way ahead of it; he brought a first grade teacher with him who needs ESL support. He said there's a bilingual teaching aid they use only for duty at the high school. So this teacher accepted Nora; she gets the aid. Apparently, the high school principal is, uh . . ."

Jake laughed while swallowing some fruit. "He's pissed off—too bad. That's more good news, then. What was the upsetting part?" He sipped the beer.

"Well, Munz and Jesús made a big deal about how I supposedly stand up for my students."

"Good for them—that's exactly what you do."

"Jake, the doctor's appointment was on my mind. As much as I want this baby, I felt so guilty when they said those things about me, knowing all along I probably won't be with those kids next year."

"Ah, I get it now." Jake smiled. "Tina, while you're on maternity leave, you can volunteer for some hours with your own class; maybe sub half-day. I bet you'll need to get out of the house anyway; I have a feeling Alicia would love to babysit."

Her mouth open part way, Tina thought about what he said. "Jake, that's

such a good idea. I would still know a lot of my kids if I take the class back after next year.”

“Sure, if that’s what you decide to do.”

She smiled and ate her first bite of fruit.

“Uh, not to spoil the mood,” Jake said, “but I have to run something by you. I invited Ben over for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“So? That’s wonderful; we have plenty of food, and Hannah would love to meet him.”

“Well, there’s a little more to it. Ben’s the one who started the fight.”

“What? That’s hard to imagine.”

He told her about Ben’s assault on Justino and what motivated it.

“Jake, after Hannah leaves, Ben can stay here as long as he wants, as far as I’m concerned.”

He looked at her sheepishly. “I, uh, already told him that. Ben’s so proud; he’s thinking it over.”

“I’ll talk to him on Thanksgiving.”

“Gracias, Latina.”



The next morning, Tina started some Thanksgiving preparations while Jake drove to Tucson to pick up Hannah. He wasn’t surprised to see her walk out of the connecting tunnel closely attended by a tall young man in a pilot’s uniform. Jake’s attractive unmarried sister, now well into her thirties, always had to deal with men falling all over themselves, at least until they heard her opinions.

She was the only Friend sibling with dark hair; her sisters said she was a partial throwback to mother’s Semitic genes or to so some putative “Indian blood from one of father’s Mormon ancestors.” Her skin, however, was almost as fair as Jake’s, making her short black hair always seem like a dye job.

Though Jake warned Hannah the weather would be cooler than L.A., she was wearing a canary yellow, light summer dress; she also had an airline blanket wrapped around her torso. Jake couldn’t wait to ask her what that was about.

Hannah spotted her brother, dumped the pilot, and rushed over to Jake, her handbag falling from the blanket as she reached out with one arm to hug him. They let go; Jake picked up the purse and held it, smiling.

“Huey, you look so good.” Hannah took the bag while holding up the blanket with her other arm. To Jake, she was the same—her dark round eyes, steady wry grin and cute lump of a nose gave her a genial countenance, though she always considered herself to be “all business.”

"You look great, Sis. So who was your friend, Ms. Friend, and what's with the blanket?"

She shook her head. "He's some back-up flyboy who came to my rescue." She didn't lower her voice as they started arm-in-arm down the crowded passageway. "He managed to put this blanket on me without feeling my boobs, though he took a damn good look." Hannah, a trim five-four, had always taken guff from her taller sisters for not being sturdy enough to support her heavy breasts.

"What? You lost me." Jake tried not to care that Hannah was drawing a lot of attention.

"The stewardess spilled a whole cup of water right on my chest—actually put out my cigarette. The girl was so embarrassed she brought me towels, a blanket, and junior flyboy to apologize. I dried off in the bathroom; my bra is still sopping."

Jake started laughing as he led her around a corner toward the baggage area. "Did they know you're a lawyer? Maybe they thought you would sue."

"Real funny, Huey. Pilot Bob, who didn't even know his name is a palindrome, sat down and started hitting on me. He decided I wasn't worth the effort after a minute or two of politics—about average," she added with a laugh.

"Good riddance. Do you have a backup slingshot packed?"

"Of course, but I can wait; it's just water."

Jake chuckled. "Yeah, at least it wasn't beer or wine."

"Glad to provide the entertainment." Hannah smiled. "I need a smoke."

On the trip back to Sofia, they filled each other in on their lives. Hannah had a laugh at what she called "the spectacle" of Shangri-Village; then she turned serious and spoke a few minutes about reviving the litigation against their mother's hospital.

"Hannah, you know I'd testify like I promised, but if you start it up again, don't send me copies of all the threats."

"The schmucks have to pay for what they did, Jake."

"I just don't care; the money isn't worth all the BS and stress."

"I told you, they count on people to get tired of the process so they can get away with it."

"Maybe so, but look at us right now. Instead of just hanging out, we're talking about this crap."

"Okay, I won't bring it up again while I'm here."

"Thanks." Jake slowed for Sofia. "We *are* here." He turned in at the CHIMICHANGAS sign.

"You must be kidding."



Ben came over on Thanksgiving morning before noon and knocked on the door. "Excuse," he said through the screen to Jake, "uh, a problem." Ben pointed to the yard; Jake ran out, Tina and Hannah following.

Fiera had yanked Hannah's expensive bra from the clothesline and was tearing around the yard with white nylon stuck over her snout, the rest of the material dragging in the dirt. Jake yelled; the mutt stopped only because a strap snagged on some creosote. Before Jake could get to her, Fiera growled and pulled the elastic back until it snapped like a rubber band, flinging the bra to the top of a tall mesquite.

"Damn it." Jake headed back to the house.

Hannah was on the porch, grinning around puffs on her cigarette. "Look at that crazy mutt." She pointed at Fiera; the dog circled the dark green bush as if trying to decide how to climb it. Tina, her eyes wide open, stood by Hannah while Ben covered a smile with his hand. Jake grabbed his shovel and turned to the dog before he realized everyone was laughing.

"It's okay, Jake," Hannah told him.

"I can get it down, Sis."

Tina chuckled. "He's very good with that shovel."

"Very funny." Jake walked toward Fiera, who was now sitting and looking up at the bra as if she was waiting for a treat.

Hannah snuffed the cigarette with her foot. "Huey, it's shot; just let her have it."

"You sure?"

Hannah nodded. Jake snagged the torn underwear and threw it to the dog. Fiera snatched it up and sprinted away with her new toy and its strange physical properties. She tossed it in the air repeatedly, tugging on the elastic after each catch.

They all watched her, chuckling, until Tina said to Jake, "Your shovel was a little late this time—hi-yah!"

"What's that all about?" Hannah asked.

"Tina's just been *dying* to tell you."

She explained and demonstrated the scorpion's demise to Hanna, taking the shovel and slamming it on the ground. By the time Tina screamed "Hi-yah!" three more times, they were all laughing again.



After Thanksgiving turkey with atypical trimmings like Ana's tamales and Hannah's version of Rose Friend's potato *kugl*, they cleared the table and Ben insisted on doing the dishes. Tina, Jake, and Hannah thanked him and went out in light jackets to walk over to Jesús and Ana's, where they were expected for Mexican cocoa and pumpkin *empanadas*.

"He's such a nice kid," Hannah said, carrying a bottle of wine and puffing on another cigarette. As they started down one of the driveways, Jake explained Ben's situation and told Hannah he might be living with them for a while.

"Where is he staying tonight?"

"With a work buddy in La Cholla, I think. I told him to stick around so I can drive him down there; otherwise he's apt to walk the ten miles."

Hannah flicked off some ash. "Jake, he might sleep in a park or something. That's ridiculous—when he joins us at your friend's house, invite him to stay on the couch tonight."

Jake turned to his spouse. "Tina?"

"Of course, Jake."

"Okay, we'll see what he says." They continued down the gravel lane; the late-fall desert flora around them was almost barren.

"We have something to tell you, Hannah," Jake said.

She stopped, put out her smoke and fingered a pebble from under her heel. "Is it something good about this forest of sticks, cactus and rocks?"

Jake scoffed. "Okay, city girl; we like it here." They walked on.

"Yes, I get that; so what is it?" She saw Tina shy away, moving a couple steps ahead. "What? You guys aren't pregnant, are you?"

Jake smiled and grimaced at once. "We're not getting too excited about it until Tina's further along."

"Of course, after everything she's been through. How far are you, Tina?"

Tina slowed; they walked together again. "More than two months; the date is June twentieth."

"Well, I'll follow your lead and not get too excited, but congratulations, doll." Hannah pecked Tina on the cheek, then slugged Jake in the arm.

"Ouch." He pretended to recoil in pain. "Thanks, Sis,"

"I let him call me Sis, Tina, only because it's a palindrome. Which reminds me—if you tell Caroline and Joyce, they'll start mailing diapers and a ton of other crap before you want it." They came around a bend to Jesús and Ana's place and the restaurant.

Tina sighed. "We haven't told anyone yet, except Ana."

Jake walked a few feet ahead to open the gate. "Yeah, let's keep it like this until we're absolutely sure."

Hannah nodded. "Jake, I need to talk another minute."

"I'll go on in and see if Ana needs help," Tina said.

Hannah gave her the wine. "No secrets, doll, just some sisterly advice."

"Jake can fill me in." Tina walked beneath the pruned rose arbor.

Hannah turned to her brother. "Two things, Jake. First, Uncle Myron is still pissed off."

"He is? He sent us a check, much to my surprise."

"He's taking it out on Joyce; won't even talk to her."

"Ah, now *that's* the ego we know and love."

"Joyce is handling it, but I wanted you to know."

"I'll give her a call and thank her again."

"She'd like that." Hannah paused, sneering at the desert. "Jake, where are you planning to have the baby?"

"A small Catholic hospital in La Cholla or up at the university; we're not sure yet. The guy in La Cholla seems to know what he's doing, but, personally, I think he's a putz."

Hannah shook her head. "I know an O.B. and a pediatrician in L.A. even *I* would go to."

"You thinking about getting pregnant, Sis?"

"Funny, Huey. Point is, that's where you'd probably have to go to be sure of some competence."

"I think we'll be fine here."

"Okay, just keep an eye on them, and hold onto your documents."

Jake rolled his eyes. "Let's go have some empanadas."



Part III



July 4, 1976, La Cholla, Arizona

20

Hannah, who had only been to Acapulco, wanted to go to Mexico on the day after Thanksgiving. Jake told her that the border towns he had been to—Tijuana, Mexicali, and Juárez—were big cities, but old La Cholla wasn't much larger than La Cholla, U.S.A. Jake and Tina had been there to shop and dine, but that's not what interested Hannah, so Jake recruited Ana to show them around.

In light morning traffic, they crossed the border after nods from two inscrutable *federales* who hardly bothered to look up from their magazines. Jake warned Hannah to be prepared for the “third degree” on the way back. He said that between his beard, Tina's long hair, and Loretta, the U.S. Border Patrol was apt to check for contraband in most any cavity, human or automotive.

The first two blocks of La Cholla were a miniature version of the carnivals of commerce Jake had seen on the way into the border cities; he told Hannah that this was “tchotchke heaven.” The stands and shops were just opening for the day to sell everything from genuine crafts to pure schlock from Tlaquepaque, Mexico City, and even the Yucatán. You could find exquisite handmade pottery on one shelf, he explained, right above another with a Mariachi band of actual frogs lacquered into stiff grins, their tiny fiddles and horns in perpetual performing position. Jake told her the shops were also full of tourist fare like booze, jewelry, fireworks, sombreros, sarapes, huaraches, and rack after rack of other wool and leather goods.

A few locals pattered around on the next two blocks, some of them opening, and others patronizing the dry goods stores, a pharmacy, two small markets, a laundry, bakery, and a green PEMEX gas station, where an old Dodge waited at a pump. Hannah was chatting in back with Ana, who leaned forward to tell Jake to take a right at the PEMEX, the corner with the only traffic light—Hannah tried to restrain a snicker. After the turn, Ana pointed to a dilapidated two-story office building with POLICIA on its cracked white neon sign; Ana said this was old La Cholla's equivalent of city hall.

The next block had a half-dozen well-kept one-story stucco or brick homes taking up full-sized lots. Several dark-skinned women in full skirts swept with grass brooms in front of heavy wooden doors or black iron gates; at one residence you could see into a lush patio. At the top of every outside wall, the owners had embedded a macabre rainbow of glass shards. After Hannah commented that this home defense method looked “medieval,” Ana told her that La Cholla’s moneyed class lived in this small area; the women out front were their maids. “Mostly Indians,” she added.

The wide street funneled to a narrow paved path through block after block of simple adobes and frame houses, no space between neighbors and most places without sidewalks or yards. Many of the residents were going about their business, a few driving by in old American cars and VW beetles, others walking off for the day, some carrying lunch in colored mesh bags. There were more sweepers, just moving around dust it seemed; Ana said these women lived in the neighborhood.

An occasional two-story place stood out from the small plain bungalows; Hannah pointed one out, a yellow-green stucco with HOSPITAL painted on the wall in fading black four-inch letters. “Maybe you should just have the baby here.”

“This is actually more like a clinic,” Ana responded, trying not to sound critical of Jake’s sister.

“Don’t mind me, always a wisecrack.”

Jake thought Hannah was almost self-deprecating.

As the road deteriorated to gravel then dirt, it gradually gained some altitude toward a high bluff in the desert ahead, and the houses became huts and lean-tos made of discarded wood, metal, and plastic. Undernourished children, dogs, chickens, and goats gravitated from one hovel to another, not seeming to belong anywhere.

The slum seemed to go on for a mile before Ana asked Jake to make a turn. Not fifty yards past the shacks, they came to a sleepy lane of ten-foot-square pastel cabins between two long, turquoise, frame-built *cantinas* with unlit neon signs. A green neon beer advertisement flickered to life; a thin man in a white apron walked out in front of the first joint to pick up trash and sweep, waving down the road to a fellow barkeep doing his own chores.

Jake stopped; Ana said this was La Cholla’s red light district. Without sounding critical, she asked if Hannah had seen enough of real Mexico. Looking embarrassed for one of the only times Jake could recall, Hannah thanked Ana for the tour and said she would like to treat everyone to lunch.

Jake turned around and drove back close to the border; they got out,

shopped a little, and walked around the plaza until it was after eleven. They went to a place called La Mina, a half-dug tunnel that passed for a mineshaft, converted years before into a restaurant.

During the meal, Hannah quickly downed two margaritas and lavishly tipped a roving Mariachi, telling Jake to ask them not to play tourist music like La Bamba. When Jake asked what she wanted to hear, Hannah flicked her cigarette and said, “Jesus, Huey, have them play what *they* like.”



After what Jake called, “Hurricane Hannah’s visit,” he, Tina, and their new boarder settled in for the three weeks before the Christmas holidays. Though his work had finished, Ben wanted to pay some rent; Jake told him ten dollars a week would be plenty. Ben’s uncle came back in January and found his nephew some part-time work cleaning fields. Ben told Jake and Tina he could now pay seventy-five a month. They negotiated the room and board to forty dollars, with Ben doing some of the maintenance and yard work.

That winter was mild, as expected, though they had one enjoyable day when an inch of snow stayed on the ground for hours. Tina passed the “iffy” months without complications, and remained with Doctor Serna, who cheerily characterized her pregnancy with comments like, “It’s going by the book,” or “Steady as she goes.” He even told Tina he expected her delivery would be the “rolling-off-the-log variety.” When Tina reported this to Jake, he said, “Maybe call Joyce for a reality check; she told me she felt like she was going to die with every kid.”

On a March weekend, the Friends celebrated Jake’s twenty-seventh birthday with a “night on the town” after watching the Cubs play the Cleveland Indians in Tucson. Three weeks later, they were driving down to La Cholla during spring break; it would be Jake’s first time to go with Tina to one of Serna’s appointments. Looking out at the desert, Jake noticed that the outer branches of the usually dull-green palo verde were in full golden bloom. The dry afternoon air made it feel like summer, he thought, though the temperature was barely in the eighties.

Ben didn’t have to work that day and decided to come along. Fiera sat contentedly on Loretta’s back seat next to Ben, who was still not accustomed to living with a good-sized, very friendly “inside” dog. Ben had a plastic bag on the seat beside him, his long hair was combed back, and he wore his only dress shirt as well as a new leather belt and some clean blue jeans. He was trying to pet Fiera and also keep the slobber and dog hair off his clothes.

Jake looked over at Tina; her new girth and heavier breasts pretty much filled the peasant blouse he gave her the year before at Candlestick Point. They had finally told their friends of the pregnancy, but Tina continued wearing outfits that camouflaged the coming event.

Recalling how his sisters spoke of Joyce's supposed "glow," Jake was now a believer. The long blonde hair that first attracted him to Tina had somehow gained even more luster, flowing now over her shoulders in the sunlight that streaked through Loretta's windows. There was also a definite natural blush to Tina's cheeks, especially with her more frequent smiles.

"What?" she asked him wryly.

Though Loretta's noisy motor made it unlikely Ben could overhear, Jake mumbled, "You're such a cutie."

"What a laugh. Watch the traffic, please."

Jake smiled lasciviously. "I just hope you're feeling as good as you look."

"Glory, not so loud, Don Juan." She glanced back at Ben, who was watching the countryside.

"What happened to Don Joaquín?" Jake asked, acting hurt.

Tina grinned. "You sound like the other one." She thought for a moment. "Well, Joyce was right; she said the sixth and seventh month were the easiest—I can't even imagine getting any bigger."

Eyebrows hopping, Jake pretended to ogle her. "More for me to hold," he said in a low voice.

Tina furrowed her brows. "Jake, I'm glad you're so enthused about all this, but I didn't expect you to be quite so, uh—what did Hannah say you were full of?"

"Crap?" he asked, chuckling.

She tsked. "No, a Yiddish word your mother used."

"Oh, *schmaltz*—chicken fat."

"That's it. It also means like corny, right?"

"Close enough. I'm preparing for Serna; see if I can be more *schmaltzy* than he is."

"I think you're just getting excited about the baby."

"Okay—guilty," he said, smiling. They passed the Serna warehouse and Jake saw Ben duck down as they came to a squad car parked off the highway. "I think that's Jesús, Ben—take it easy."

Ben peeked out from behind the seat. "The *jefe* or *Sánchez*, maybe sit in the car with him." Chief of Police, "Whitey" LeBlanc and his minion, Corporal Sanchez, were both fond of detaining farm workers "on suspicion" and without cause.

Jake had his eye on the rearview. “It’s not coming, Ben; you’re okay.” He turned onto Garden Drive and drove up the hill and by La Cholla Gardens to the small medical complex, where he pulled in and parked, five minutes early for the three-thirty appointment.

“Maestro, after the doctor, I stay in La Cholla, okay?” Ben asked from the back.

Jake looked up in his mirror again. “Of course. Can we drop you somewhere?”

“Yes, please.” Ben looked like he was going to say where, but didn’t. After he left with Fiera on a walk, the Friends started for the office, Tina holding a file folder and Jake lugging her full Cameroon purse.

“Ben looks so handsome in his outfit,” Tina said.

“I think he’s going to meet his *novia* on the other side.”

“That serious? I didn’t know.”

“He just says ‘my friend’ with a big smile.”

“Well, I hope she’s worthy of him.”

“Yeah.” He reached to open the office door. Jake took his book out of Tina’s purse as they entered, then spoke to the secretary—a thin, pale woman in her sixties. When he tried to arrange to join Tina and the doctor after the exam, Jake wasn’t sure if he got through to her. He judged that she was actually a receptionist, and barely able to perform those duties. Jake sat down; the Friends were the only ones in the small waiting room until a woman and her son came out after a few minutes. When the receptionist finished with them, she smiled at Tina and opened the door for her.

Reading his novel intermittently, Jake gave up and just waited. Tina finally came out alone, shaking her head and mouthing, “I tried.”

Jake walked to the desk. “Excuse me, I explained to you that I wanted to speak to the doctor; can I see him now?”

Taken aback by Jake’s pithy tone, the woman’s eyes were enormous through her thick glasses. “I’m sorry sir. I left him a note; I’ll try to catch him.”

“Catch him?”

“He’s leaving for a lodge meeting.”

Crap. “Okay, go ahead and try, please.”

After the woman went inside, Tina spoke to Jake from her chair. “What are you going to say to him?”

“Nothing.” He started to pace by the desk. “I just want to hear from his lips how you’re doing. I’d like to feel a little more like I’m a part of all this.”

“I know, Jake, but try not to make trouble.”

Jake held back a scowl. “I won’t.”

Following the receptionist, Serna walked in, tucking a loud Hawaiian shirt into his slacks. Though Jake had met him briefly at the party, he realized now that the doctor was a thinner, much younger version of the fair-skinned, side-burned uncle, but without the sneer. He reached his hand out to Jake. "Mister Friend, that's quite the positive name you folks have," he said with a chortle.

"It's Jake; we met at your uncle's party." He grasped the physician's hand.

Serna, like his uncle, made sure to squeeze harder than Jake before letting go. "Of course, the school shindig; I remember you now."

Like hell you do. "I asked to come in at the end of Tina's appointment to talk to you."

"Yes, sorry about that; I didn't realize Mrs. Friend meant *today*. We don't get very many husbands who are so, uh, attentive and interested in this process."

Gee, I wonder why. "I'd just like to hear directly from you how Tina and the baby are doing."

"Certainly." He made a broad smile, moving right to Tina and patting her shoulder once. "They're doing wonderfully; strong hearts, both of them, and all other indicators are within normal parameters. I'm sure Mrs. Friend can fill you in on the test results." He pointed to her manila folder. "If there's nothing else, I do have a commitment."

That's it? Ask him something.

"Mister Friend?" Serna asked with the same ingratiating smile, taking a step away.

"Uh, yeah, we'll let you go to your meeting. I'll be with her next time; we'll save up our questions."

"That'll be fine; you can come in for the last few minutes of the appointment if you like."

"Yes, I'll be there." *The whole time, schmuck.*

They left the office and saw Fiera running on the lawn to fetch an old tennis ball Ben had tossed.

"Jake, I could use some time in my classroom while you take Ben." Tina released his arm.

"Sure, whatever you need."

"We also have a parcel from Joyce at the post office."

"Right, I'll get it, if it's not too late."

They all got in the truck and Jake dropped Tina off at her school. As he and Ben came down Garden Drive, Jake asked him where he wanted to go.

"The border, maestro."

"How hard will it be for you to get back?"

“One day, maybe two.”

It took less than five minutes before Jake stopped at one of the last stores on the U.S. side.

“*Gracias*,” Ben said, opening the door, the plastic sack in his hand.

“Sure. Maybe we could meet your friend sometime.”

“*Sí, maestro. Adiós.*”

“*Hasta luego.*” After watching Ben walk right up to the border, Jake backed out and drove the two blocks to the post office. He parked twenty yards away in the cool shade of some old maples. Rolling the windows halfway up so Fiera couldn’t get out, he turned around to her.

Tie her to the bumper? Only one car here—just go. “Okay, pooch. Stay, I’ll be right back.” Fiera grunted, then shuddered her whole body as if she were wet.

“That’s a good girl.” Jake closed the door and ran in; there were two people in line. He got the box in a couple of minutes and ran back out to his truck. For the next several seconds, Jake stared unbelievably at the shambles before him.

The dog had attacked Loretta’s interior and was sitting on the front seat, contentedly chewing on the steering wheel cover. Torn from the ceiling, a beach towel-sized hunk of Loretta’s special-ordered tan headliner hung down to the floor. Fiera had gnawed the custom pseudo-leather brown seat covers and sun visors down to foam in places, and only springs remained of the shredded plastic wind-wing knobs.

“Gimme that,” he said, pulling on the material in her mouth, but Fiera thought he was playing and yanked back. “Dumb dog, you’re in *trouble!*” he yelled, letting go. Fiera turned and jumped on the back seat to chew on her treasures. “I’ll be damned.” Jake gathered the hunk of headliner so he could see out the back.

He drove up to the school and walked into Tina’s classroom, cackling strangely.

She looked up from the forms she was working on. “Something funny?”

“This, my dear, is ironic laughter.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Your dog is testing our marriage.”

“What?” Tina asked, now with eye contact.

“Fiera ate my truck.”

“She did what?”

“She ripped up the whole interior during the three lousy minutes I was in the post office.”

“My gosh, Jake; I’m so sorry.”

"No, you warned me a hundred times; I didn't think she could go quite that nuts."

"You're taking it awfully well."

He exhaled through his lips, horse-like. "She doesn't even know why I'm pissed."

"No, she probably does." Tina stood, putting some papers to take home into a white milk crate. "Where is she now?"

Jake sighed. "Under a tree, tied to the bumper, where I should've put her before."

"How bad is the damage?"

"Loretta's drivable."

"You should've seen your face when you said it."

"Said what?"

"Fiera ate my truck." She tried to cover a short peal of laughter with her hand. "Sorry."

"Yeah, funny, now that it's over." He shrugged then watched Tina pack the plastic container until it overflowed with books and construction paper.

She picked up her purse and looked at him. "Well, let's go see the damage; I'm ready."

"You forgot your folder." Jake pointed to her desk. "You were going to fill me in on everything, remember?"

"Yes, I'm glad you saw it." Tina stuffed the medical info into her big purse.

He hefted the crate; they started for the exit. "So, how badly did I embarrass you at the doctor's today?" Jake asked as Tina reached for the door handle.

"Maybe a little, but you did the right thing." She followed him outside.

"I don't know how you can be so patient with that putz."

"I think he's competent, medically anyway."

"Yeah, guess we can't have everything."

21

The end of the school year went well for Tina, who was very pleased when Nora settled in quickly with her new teacher. The principal gradually concluded that Tina wasn't a "problem," but a knowledgeable educator dedicated to her students. La Cholla School District granted her the standard unpaid maternity leave for the following year and then, on recommendations from Munz and the principal, she was given the option of a part-time contract to teach her own class in the afternoons, which Tina accepted.

As for Jake, his program doubled the previous year's number of high school graduates, including the MAPAS equivalency degrees. The feud between Ben and Justino petered out when Mister Hernandez confiscated the knife, gave it to Jake, and told his son to mind his own business.

Both of the Friends did have one similar hassle. Tina's was partly due to her lack of exposure in Africa to U.S. holidays and patriotic rituals. She had witnessed nationalism running amok in Equatorial Guinea, and though she felt privileged to be a U.S. citizen, Tina held a quiet contempt for bombastic patriotism, no matter the country.

Her school in La Cholla was involved in Bicentennial activities all year, which Tina assumed were optional. Many of her students were part-time "pull-outs" from regular classrooms, and some of the teachers started holding her kids in March for Bicentennial play practices. Reluctant to interrupt their work more than once a week, Tina didn't always let them go.

She met with the teacher of a very needy second-grader whose progress with Tina came to a sudden halt after missing three times in one week. She politely inquired how long the interruptions would last; the veteran teacher fumed, telling Tina that "her kind of attitude" was unpatriotic. The principal came timidly the next day to inform Tina that it was required to release students for the practices.

Jake's run-in came after the high school principal organized a bus trip for "all seventh through twelfth students and teachers to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime event," the impending arrival of the official Bicentennial train in Arizona. Jake informed him over the phone that Rosa would chaperone Sofia's junior high kids and some of the high school students.

"Some?" the principal asked Jake in a scold.

"Yes, a few have already left to work, and four of my equivalency students can't go."

"Why not? The board expects a full turnout."

"I'm taking them that same day for their appointment at the junior college to take their exams."

"Then you can change it."

"No, I can't make them wait until July. This is the last group; they've studied all year."

"We're putting a lot of time and expense into this. It's a Board directive; you don't have a choice."

"I don't think Ortega will hold me to that, especially if it means some students won't stand for their diplomas."

"It isn't a real diploma."

"I disagree."

"You don't care about this trip, do you, Friend?"

"I didn't say that, but these kids' exams are more important."

"We'll see about that."

Superintendent Ortega allowed the MAPAS equivalency students to skip the Bicentennial train. After that, the petty secondary principal had his secretary forward any calls from Sofia to the vice-principal.



Classes were out the second day of June, none too soon for Tina, due in about three weeks and dealing better with her self-described "enormity" than she was with the high temperatures. She had the first fainting spell of her life, and also had to ask Serna for a prescription to alleviate some stubborn rashes in uncomfortable places.

Jake spoke to Rosalinda's father, offering to split costs to upgrade from the old swamp cooler in their rental. Juanito Montalvo said he was about to do it anyway, but it would mean a twenty-dollar rent increase. Jake quickly agreed, offering to help install the new forced-air system. He hoped his limited mechanical experience, maintaining Loretta, would help, but Jake ended up mostly holding the tools for Juanito.

The first storms came the next week, just after they finished hooking up the new air-conditioning. Both the rain and the cool inside air seemed to relax Tina for a day or two until she realized she wasn't "doing anything." She vigorously took up her knitting, and by the time the due date approached, Tina cranked out more booties than the baby could ever use; so, she started crocheting long white and blue stripes—the beginnings of an afghan.

When the baby was a week overdue, they went to Serna, who said everything was "just fine." The doctor expected her to start labor at any time.

Two days later, it was over a hundred degrees again so Jake settled on the sofa with a cold Bohemia, hoping to watch a *M*A*S*H* rerun. That failing, he picked up the newspaper and left the TV on Monday Night Football, turning off the sound. Jake almost nodded off before Tina, crocheting in their new rocker, made a sudden comment.

"There it is again." She looked up from her project. "That definitely isn't kicking."

When her words registered, Jake sat up, immediately alert. "What is it, then?"

"My whole middle constricted; it might be a real contraction."

Jake stood. "Do you think they're serious?"

"I don't think so—far apart; didn't hurt much."

"I could call Serna."

"It's okay, Jake. We'll wait and see what they do."

"Okay—whatever you think." He sat again. "Tina, why is the afghan blue and white? Expecting a boy?"

"No. These are just the colors I had."

The mild contractions stopped after a few hours and didn't return until Friday; it was the second of July. Jake had everything planned—Tina was packed; they would take Fiera to Rosalinda on their way out, and Ben would be home in the evenings to take care of the yard and house. Stronger contractions started that night at about nine, Ben still hadn't shown up, and Jake thought it was too late to bother Rosalinda's family.

Damn, now what'll you do? He took Tina's small suitcase out to Loretta, then hurried back in through the kitchen door.

"Have another one?" he asked; she was on the couch, crocheting again.

Tina put what was now a four-by-six-foot partial afghan on the lap of her sacky blue maternity gown. "About five minutes ago."

"Stronger?"

"A little, maybe."

He jotted on a scrap of paper. "I've been keeping track—that's fourteen

minutes apart.” He showed her his simple ledger and the wind-up alarm from the bedroom.

“Yes, Jake, I noticed.” She nonchalantly kept hooking her yarn. At Tina’s last appointment, Jake asked for a specific indicator on the contractions. Serna said to start for the hospital when they were less than ten minutes apart, or to come right away if her “water” broke.

“What can I get for you, Tina?”

“That’s the third time you asked in fifteen minutes. You might want to calm down a bit.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He sat with her on the couch, pretending to watch Walter Cronkite interview some Israeli official about a hijacked airliner in Uganda. Jake chewed on a thumbnail, a habit less than thirty minutes old. The TV interview became just noise and a blur; he turned to her.

“Tina, don’t worry about Fiera—got it handled.”

“Oh, really? And how did—?” Tina’s face distorted for seconds as if a horn had blasted in her ears.

“Another one?”

She exhaled deeply, followed by some shorter puffs. “Yes, Jake.”

“That’s real good breathing, Tina.”

She forced out a couple more breaths. “Thanks a lot. *That* was a good one.”

“A lot stronger?”

“No, a little.”

“Okay, that was at nine thirty-two and thirty seconds.” He wrote down the numbers.

“Nine thirty-two should be adequate, Don Joaquín,” Tina said with a slight grin.

“What?”

“You’re being very sweet.”

He scoffed. “First thing he’ll ask is how far apart. That’s eleven minutes, thirty seconds. Should we call?”

“Not yet. So how did you handle Fiera?”

“I tied her under the tree; I’ll leave Ben a note to take her over.”

Tina shook her head a little. “Juanito’s coming over now to get her.”

“He is? I was thinking it’s too late to bother them.”

“They told me to call anytime.”

“Oh. Wait, *you* called?”

“So?”

“Well, that means you think it’s really happening.”

“Sometime tonight, maybe. I think he’s outside; go on, Jake.”

“You’re okay?”

She nodded. “Just fine.”

“Watch the clock, all right? Be right back.” He ran out to help with Fiera but came back for the dog food. “Be right back,” he called again.

“Not going anywhere,” she said, but Jake was gone.

A couple of minutes later, he rushed in. “Okay, that’s all handled.”

“Nine forty or so, a pretty good one.”

“What?” He snatched up the scrap of paper. “That’s less than ten minutes!” he nearly shouted.

“Okay, Jake, tell him we’re coming in.”

He dialed the answering service and found out Doctor McNally was on call until midnight. The woman told him that Doctor Serna was in Phoenix and not expected back until after eleven.

“What’s the deal?” Jake glared at the phone’s base. “We weren’t told he would be out of town.”

“That’s not the way it works, sir.”

Crap. “Just a moment, please.” He muffled the receiver into the side of his jeans, quickly explaining Serna’s whereabouts to Tina. “. . . not back until eleven. We could go to emergency at the university.”

“I’m not sure we’d make it in time.”

That proof of imminence sunk in right away. “My God,” he said, nearly panicked.

“Jake, it’ll be okay. Doctor McNally has probably delivered thousands.”

He lifted the phone. “Okay, please tell Doctor McNally we’re on our way.”

“I will, Mister Friend, and Doctor Serna will get the message when he returns.”

Great. He hung up and turned to her, but she was waddling away, holding her side. “Where you going, Tina?”

“To pee, if you must know. Everything’s fine, Jake; you should get your book—you have a lot of waiting around ahead of you. And maybe you want to change.”

He looked down at the dirty tee and jeans he put on earlier to drain Loretta’s oil. “Do I have time?”

“Yes, Jake,” she called back from the hall.

He put on Bermudas, a pressed summer shirt, and sneakers. Jake found his Cubs cap, a novel he was reading, and the spiral notebook he used for addresses and journaling. They met in the hallway; he took her gently by the arm out to the driveway.

With Tina up front, Jake drove Loretta slowly on the bumpy driveway out to the road and turned left for La Cholla. Her contractions didn't get much more severe on the way in.

At the hospital, a nurse escorted them to a small labor room near emergency. They let Jake stay with Tina because her water still had not broken, though the contractions were now closer and stronger. With each one, he helplessly held her hand and kept a cool washcloth on her forehead until the nurse asked Jake to leave so she could do an exam.

In the hallway a few minutes later, the nurse told him Tina was starting to "dilate nicely" and was on her way to what would probably be a fairly quick delivery. She added that Doctor McNally was already there but asleep, to be woken when "things were moving faster."

Jake went back to handholding and cool washrag duty. Tina's face contorted during the contractions but she didn't make much noise, sometimes even nodding off in between. He tried to make small talk once, but her grimace made him decide to keep his mouth shut.

When Doctor Serna showed up at quarter to twelve in a tuxedo, Tina was wailing with each contraction. Jake had just been escorted out to the hallway again and told it was time for him to go to the "family room."

Jake glowered at him. "Doctor Serna, you were at a wedding?"

"My niece's, but apparently I'm right on time."

Three cheers. "Is there some reason you couldn't let us know you were gone?"

"That's not the procedure, Mister Friend. Everything was covered here," he said with his practiced smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go change; we'll see if your new baby is ready to join us."

They banished Jake to the faraway room, where he sat for about fifteen minutes before sneaking back to the hall near emergency, a couple of doors from the labor area. He listened furtively, waited, and then heard Tina cry out even louder than before. *Jesus! Just go in.*

A nurse came out; Jake realized she was new, but he couldn't recall much about the other one, except she was short and wore light blue scrubs. This young woman—tall, heavy, and dressed all in white—told him that Tina's water had broken. She took Jake's arm and directed him like a well-mannered sergeant back to the waiting area.

The small windowless room had two chairs, a sofa and coffee table. After a half hour of flipping through magazines, Jake was sure he could make out Tina's screams very faintly through the air duct. *Who else? The joint's nearly empty. This place is driving me nuts. Why can't I just hold her hand—do something?*

After Jake passed another frantic half hour talking to himself, the burly nurse finally came in to tell him their “big eight-pound girl” had entered the world normally, kicking and screaming. Though the delivery was overdue, she said, there were no unusual complications. Jake was so elated on his way to see Tina and the baby, it didn’t register that Serna had not spoken with him. He found out later the doctor went straight home after his long day.

As soon as he hugged Tina and got a first look at the baby, Jake thought their child looked like a chubby, wrinkled old bald man; she even had visible veins on her limbs, but he decided to keep his observations to himself. Tina, who barely acknowledged anyone through her stupor, valiantly attempted a smile for the baby.

Jake held their drowsy daughter, watching her watery, indistinct eyes open slightly behind translucent blonde lashes. *Geez, she could be a redhead.* Like any first-time father, he was awed by the diminutive fingers softly gripping his pinkie; it no longer mattered that she looked so homely.

“See, Latina, everything’s fine,” Jake said; a solitary tear coursed down her cheek. Thinking Tina was joyful, Jake handed the baby to the nurse so he could hug his wife again. He leaned over but stopped when Tina lowered her chin and looked away, seeming to brood.

The husky nurse pulled Jake several feet to the side, whispering to him that Tina was spent from the delivery and the late hour; she would be fine after a night’s rest. The nurse whisked the baby away; Jake went back and held Tina’s hand until she was asleep.

He walked down the hall past the nurses’ station to the nursery, where a tiny woman, her grey hair bundled in a mesh net, was rocking their daughter. Jake walked around the glass corner and looked in. The woman’s pale, oatmeal-brown face, pleated by age, formed a brief smile for Jake. No taller than an average nine-year-old, she bowed her head as she stood up with the sleeping baby, wrapped predictably in a soft pink blanket. The nurse, in salmon-colored scrubs, had to reach up a few inches to place the child gently into a tall open incubator with EMMA ROSE FRIEND, 7/3/76, 1:17 A.M., 8 LBS, 3 OZ printed on its pink card.

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Jake looked in at Emma, thinking she already wasn't as wrinkled as when he saw her earlier. About three feet away, another baby slept in one of the incubators. She had black hair and fawn-colored skin; her card said: MARÍA ELENA CRUZ, 7/1/76, 6:55 P.M., 5 LBS, 10 OZ.

Jake watched the slight but sturdy woman lean on the door. She came into the hall and took another step as if she were going to walk past him. Her mouth faltering to one side, she smiled with something of a grimace.

"May I speak with you, nurse?"

"*Sí, pero no hablo inglés, señor.*"

She understands it okay. Jake saw her badge; it said, MARÍA R. "*Discúlpeme, señora. ¿You are not a nurse?*" he asked in Spanish.

"*No, I help the nurses.*" Her Spanish was succinct, easy for him to understand. She didn't seem surprised that Jake was bilingual. "*¿You are Señor Fren, no?*"

"*Sí, señora.*"

"*Yo soy María.*"

Feeling somehow compelled to bow to this woman, he kept it to a nod. "*Mucho gusto, señora. I see we have two Mariás here today.*" He smiled toward the other baby.

"*Sí. She is the child of my neighbor.*"

"*¿Is she named in your honor?*"

María lowered her chin. "*There are many Mariás. Yo soy María Juana.*"

She must take some guff with that name. "*¿Señora, how do you think my daughter is doing?*"

María's neutral expression turned to a slight crooked frown, which vanished immediately as if she had committed some transgression. "*It is not my place to talk of this.*"

He said nothing, his brows slanted inward, showing his puzzlement.

“Señor, what I know is that she is a very good baby; they say she has no problems.”

Don't be so paranoid, Jake. He nodded slowly to this old information, covering a yawn with his wrist.

“I believe maybe you need to rest, señor.”

“Sí.” He chuckled, lowering his arm. “I can rest in the waiting room.”

“¿You live far?”

“No, en Sofía. ¿Señora, do you think it is okay if I go home for a few hours?”

“Sí. I will watch over la niña until I leave in the morning. ¿The nurse, she has your telephone number?”

You can trust her, Jake. “Sí, but I want you to have it, too.” He yanked a pen from his shirt pocket, jotted the number on a card from his wallet, and gave it to her. “I will tell the nurse I am leaving. *Muchísimas gracias, señora.*”

“No es nada, Señor Fren.”

After he told the charge nurse he was going home to sleep, Jake just looked in on Tina, careful not to disturb her rest. He went on out to Loretta and drove up the hill toward La Cholla. *You promised the sisters to call right away—it can wait until daylight.*

He stopped on International at a corner grocery, the only open business in town, where he bought a pre-made chicken sandwich and a diet soda. Jake ate in the front seat, thinking about his new parental responsibilities. He finished the sandwich and raised the can for a drink, looking around at the tape and pins he used weeks before to make temporary repairs to Loretta's interior. *It'll be a while before you can fix her up.*

Jake yawned and started for Sofía, cranking both windows from half to all the way down. Instead of making him more alert, the balmy night air from the desert soothed Jake almost to sleep, his head snapping back up.

“Damn,” he said to the dark highway, spotting one of the “wide spots” ahead in his front beams. Jake turned into a driveway and didn't see any lights, so he just parked, leaned back on the seat and listened to a chorus of locusts, crickets, and mourning doves before he fell asleep.



Snippets of dreams raced through his mind, flashing crazily between the Visalia and La Cholla hospitals. Tina was in a bed with wooden posts, recovering from a miscarriage at one moment and giving birth the next. Then Jake could hear her screaming—it all felt familiar but distant, like he was there but not there.

His real hearing picked up car tires crunching in the gravel behind, waking him. Jake groggily looked up at his rearview; it was a squad car, stopping in the grey light after dawn. He glanced ahead through the palo verde at a house not forty feet away.

They must've had their lights off. He looked back again and saw Jesús, in uniform, getting out. *Lucky for you it's him—stay put.*

Jesús came to the window and looked in, his dark brows raised. “Jake, what the heck’s going on?”

“Sorry, Jesús; I got drowsy on my way home—had to pull off. Tina had the baby.”

“Why didn’t you say so? Get outta there for an *abrazo, hombre*. Boy or girl?”

“Girl—Emma, eight pounds,” he boasted, opening the door to climb down.

“*Felicidades, amigo.*” Jesús braced Jake’s shoulders and shook both his hands before letting go. “Wow, that’s a big girl. They’re both doing okay?”

“Tina’s wiped out, naturally; the baby’s doing fine. Man, I had no idea newborns were quite so funny looking.”

“Don’t say that around the ladies.”

“Yeah. What time is it, Jesús?”

He checked his watch. “Seven twenty-five.”

Jake yawned. “You’re just getting off?”

“Yup, covering a night shift. The new guy quit; we’re down to four again. You get any sleep?”

“A little. You must be headed to bed yourself.”

“As soon as I tell ol’ Mrs. Rangel that hippies aren’t after her.”

“Please tell her I’m sorry.” He put his fist over another yawn. “Guess I’ll just go back to the hospital.”

“Ana’s going to be so excited. When can she visit them?”

“Tina just needs some rest; tonight should be fine.”

“She’ll probably go tomorrow after the parade. We ran out of some basics at the restaurant last night—going in later. Need anything from the big city?”

“No, but would you mind checking if Ben got back? Just let him know what’s going on.”

“Sure, Jake. What else can I do?”

“If you don’t mind, maybe you could tell Rosalinda or her dad I probably won’t get Fiera until tonight.”

“You bet; give my best to Tina.”

“Thanks, Jesús.”

The sergeant got back in and drove to the lady's house; Jake turned around onto the highway. Not sure why he felt so anxious, Jake forced Loretta up to the speed limit. Passing the desert before La Cholla, he noticed the morning sun had already burned off any vestige of cool air. *Another scorcher; they did say a chance of thunderstorms—hope they're right.*

La Cholla, U.S.A. was still waking up to Saturday, one day before its Bicentennial Fourth of July celebration. On the mostly deserted International Avenue, Jake noticed World Series-type bunting hanging from some of the light standards. He turned up Garden Drive, following the familiar route past La Cholla Gardens, the doctor's office, and the turn-off for the schools.

Jake came down the hill and parked in the visitors' lot. He walked under the giant white cross into the hospital lobby and by the information counter, where the lights were off and one of the elderly watchmen was nearly asleep in a chair. Jake didn't see anyone else except an electrician by the doorway to the old wing; the man was muttering to an open panel and its unruly nest of multi-colored wires.

He entered the hall to the right, walked by the four vacant rooms, and then stopped at the nursery to see Emma and the Cruz baby. They were both sleeping; María Juana was working in a back room that Jake didn't notice before. The crossing hallway was empty except for a male orderly in orange scrubs, rolling a food cart over from the old wing.

Jake went on, passing the abandoned nurses' station and two more vacant rooms to the last door on the right. Across the hall from Tina, he finally saw another patient, the sleeping Mrs. Cruz. *Standing room only. Why are they down here on the end?* He walked into Tina's two-patient oblong room with its rolling divider open in the middle. The other bed remained undisturbed; Tina lay in hers, facing the window and stretching her left arm. The open drapes revealed only the white back of sculptured Jesus out on the lawn, and some post-World War II row houses across the street, half hidden by mature weeping willows.

Damn, I should have flowers or something. "Tina?" He approached her, but she didn't answer. "Latina?" Jake went around the bed; she stared out, putting her arm down slowly. He placed his notebook on the sill and put a hand on the bed frame. "Something wrong, Tina?" She glanced at him, breaking her trance; then she turned away again.

He moved his hand to her arm. "Tina, what is it?" She was stiff as the bed rail, and the pewter grey circles under her eyes seemed too dark, like Halloween make-up.

"The nurse brought the baby twice for me to hold," she finally said to the

window in a hoarse tone he'd never heard before. "She's not, uh, something's not right."

"What isn't right?"

"She isn't responsive." Tina remained in a tearless daze, glaring out.

"I bet that's not unusual; it probably takes a day or two."

"No, something's wrong."

"Tina, we don't know that. I'll talk to them."

She didn't answer; he thought her arm felt clammy before he let go. "I'll be back, okay?" Again, she didn't respond; Jake walked out and then back down to the vacant nurses' station. He waited there a couple of minutes before he continued down the hall to the nursery.

Jake saw María in the rocker; he walked around the corner to get a closer look. She cooed to Emma, trying to give her some kind of liquid from a bottle. She saw Jake, and then put the baby carefully in the open incubator before coming to the door. Jake had to pull the handle hard for her, realizing the glass door wasn't just heavy, but the air conditioning added some vacuum. María entered the hall.

"¿How is she, señora?"

"She does not drink, Señor Fren."

"¿Is something wrong?"

"I do not know. We need to try milk from the mother; but the nurse thinks your wife will not want to."

"I think she will."

Not realizing he was chewing his nails again, Jake went back down to Tina; she hadn't moved. He came around in front of her and described the attentive care Emma was getting from María Juana. He chuckled slightly, saying that her name must be a problem at times.

Tina looked past him. "I'm sure it isn't funny to her."

"Yeah, you're right," he quickly agreed, and then told her that María recommended she try to nurse the baby.

Tina thought for several seconds, then looked right at him. "Okay, I'll try."

To Jake, her dry eyes seemed cold and distant. "Be right back." He went out to the station to tell a young nurse what they wanted. She returned in a few minutes with the charge nurse who came on at midnight—the same large woman who had told him Emma was born.

Jake concluded earlier that this nurse was very bright and a bit bossy, the latter because she was so serious about her work. She was constantly on the move; to Jake, she was testament against the generalization that heavy people

are indolent. It made sense to him that the charge nurse had so much responsibility at a relatively young age, about thirty, he thought.

She had short tawny hair, was at least five-nine, but everything about her was thick—neck, limbs, and torso. If she had any distinctive features, they were hidden in her chubby face. The nurse's pale skin was accentuated by her all-white uniform; it was some sort of milk-colored frock with white support hose and powdery matching shoes.

“Yes, Mister Friend?” she asked in an affable tone, though her expression was neutral, all business. Jake checked her nametag; it read: B. JAWORSKY, R.N.”

“Morning. Uh, Tina would like to nurse the baby.”

“Good. We usually wait about ten hours, but it's close enough. I was afraid Mrs. Friend wouldn't want to nurse; she's so anxious about the baby.”

“You don't think anything's wrong with Emma?”

“I'd like to see her a little more active, but there's nothing alarming. She's such a fine big girl; I'm sure she'll perk up after she drinks.”

“Good. Would you mind having María bring Emma? I'd like Tina to meet her.”

“We usually bring the babies, but that'll be fine. You do know María doesn't speak much English?”

“Yes. We both speak Spanish.”

“Oh,” she said curtly and started away. The loose fabric of her tent-shaped dress fluttered; her hosiery made a noise with every stride like sandpaper on wood. Jake got a drink at a fountain and waited.

María soon came toward him, baby-talking in Spanish to Emma as she walked. “*¿Señor Fren, you asked for me to bring la niña?*”

“*Sí, señora. I think my wife is going to feel more calm with you there.*”

“*¿Ella habla español?*”

He smiled. “*Sí.*”

They entered the room, and María sat in a rocker by the window, Jake next to her in a visitor's chair. María calmly and gradually introduced herself to Tina while holding Emma, not rocking, intentionally trying to keep the baby awake. María didn't give Tina a glowing description of Emma's health but quietly reassured her that the baby was “*going to be okay.*”

“*¿Señora Fren, you want to hold la niña?*”

More alert than before, Tina was still glum. “*I will try to nurse her, María,*” she said in Spanish.

“*Está bien.*” María turned to Jake. “*Señor, they have a rule; I do not like it, but you . . .*”

He knew the rest of the explanation. *More bullcrap—don't get María in trouble.* Jake told her he would wait out by the door.

“Gracias, señor. You have to close it, por favor.”

Jake went out, shutting the door just as the charge nurse returned. “Thank you,” Jaworsky said, stopping in front of him, “I was just coming to see if María told you our rules.”

“You’re fortunate to have such a good helper. She spoke with Tina a while; it relaxed her some. They just got started.”

“Very good.” The nurse did a full about-face and started away, stopped, and turned around again. “My shift is finished, Mister Friend; someone new will check back with you soon.”

Jake thanked her and waited there not much more than five minutes before María came out with Emma. *“La niña, señor, she will not drink. La señora, she needs you now. I will return to talk to you before I go home.”*

María walked away; Jake went right into the room; Tina had assumed the same melancholic position toward the window. He walked around to the visitor’s chair and saw her blank, stolid face.

She isn't crying. What the hell? He sat down and looked out the window; nothing there registered in his mind. He decided to follow María’s example by not pestering Tina right away. Still mum, Jake just reached over and put his hand on hers.

She looked at him after a few seconds and said, “She’s not right, Jake.” Tina turned and stared out again. He patted her hand, kissed her on the forehead, got up, and walked out to the nurses’ station with his notebook.

The charge nurse was gone; Jake came to a nurse whose badge said, N. RUIZ, C.N.A. She wore an old-fashioned winged nurse’s hat and had her walnut-brown hair in a tight bun; he judged that Ruiz was determined to look like a nun. She was about five-five, thin, and in her fifties, Jake guessed; she used no make-up on her plain beige face. Ruiz was too small for her starched loose uniform she kept buttoned to the top, covering her Adam’s apple.

Jake asked if Serna had been by on morning rounds; Ruiz told him the doctor was there around seven and gave the baby “a clean bill of health.”

See what María says. He hurried to the nursery, where both babies faced the window; Emma was asleep, baby María was boxing and kicking her arms and legs. Jake thought her dark irises looked right at him.

While María Juana cleaned the sink, her replacement, a tall middle-aged woman with pinkish skin, was reading a chart. To match her peach-colored uniform, the new helper wore an orange bow in her dishwater-blond ponytail.

He tapped lightly on the window with one knuckle; the new lady just

glanced at him suspiciously. María saw Jake, dried her hands, then picked up a bulky red cloth handbag by its long strap and came out to the hall after he pulled the door for her again.

“Gracias, Señor Fren. I wanted to tell you—”

“Señora,” he interrupted, “perdón, but I have to ask you something first. ¿Did you see the doctor check Emma?”

“Sí, he looked at the chart, listened to her heart for a moment, and left.”

That’s it? He bit his thumbnail. “¿What did you have to tell me?”

“La niña, I am sorry, but she is worse since they wrote those numbers on the chart.” She gazed over at Emma.

“¿What do you mean?”

“It is more than not drinking and too much sleep; that happens sometimes.”

She turned to Jake. *“When I carried her to la señora, I noticed she was breathing fast. Also, she does not move much; it worries me that she does not cry.”*

He went right to the glass to look at Emma. *María’s not even trained, Jake. He watched his sleeping child panting in a staccato of short puffs like a puppy left too long in the sun. Jesus, look at that, and Tina sure as hell thinks something’s wrong. So what do you do? He turned around; María hadn’t moved.*

“Señor, I believe she needs help.”

He nodded. *“I’ll get the doctor,” Jake said, then switched to Spanish. “Señora, I will have to tell him what you said about Emma. ¿Will that get you in trouble?”*

Scoffing almost imperceptibly, she let the purse go to her feet. *“Don’t worry. He is afraid; he thinks I am like a witch. The problem is with a chief nurse—the one who starts now. They changed my hours to separate us.”*

“¿What is the problem with her?”

“Es hombre. He says I am the problem.”

“I’ll bet,” he grumbled.

“¿Mande?”

“Nada. ¿Do you have the same schedule tomorrow?”

“No, I return today at four in the afternoon.” She lifted her bag again.

“I am going to find Serna or McNally to check her by then. See you at four, señora.”

“Si diós quiere,” she said, walking toward the other hallway. “I will visit Señora Fren on my way out.”

“Gracias,” he called, watching her go. Jake turned to the window; baby María was crying. The helper looked up; the newborn wailed again, and the woman started toward her with a bottle. After Jake saw Emma sleep right through all the commotion, he left with even more urgency.

23

Jake went straight to the assistant nurse, Ruiz, who didn't seem very surprised when he reported the litany of symptoms for Emma. Ruiz said she had to follow the current treatment until the charge nurse came back, but she told Jake to come along while she checked Emma again.

Walking down the hall with her, Jake noticed the monastic nurse's erect posture and a heavy silver cross she had pinned to the front of her stiff uniform so it wouldn't hang in the way. Ruiz entered the nursery, then went to the back room to say something to the helper. The blonde woman peered at Jake again, as if he were suspect. Ruiz returned to the nursery; Jake watched her check Emma's pulse and chest.

Ruiz came out to the hall. "Mister Friend, her breathing is quick, but within normal range; her heart rate is fine, a little slow, in fact. I'll make sure the charge nurse is aware of all this."

"Thank you. You'll tell me when he comes back?"

"If I can. He's also in charge of the old wing, and right now he's in surgery with Doctor McNally."

"McNally's here now? Where, exactly?"

"The main operating room is near emergency."

"How do I let him know I want Emma checked?"

"In case we don't catch him, call the service before he leaves."

"The office number?"

"Yes."

"Why can't you just tell him now?"

"You can only interrupt operations for an emergency, but I'll try to catch him before he goes." She began to walk over to the intersection of the two hallways, Jake following.

"Nurse, can you get me Serna's home phone?"

"No, sir; they don't even let *us* know it."

Crap. “Does anybody have it?”

“Only the charge nurse.”

Who must really be a piece of work.

Ruiz stopped, looked to be sure they were alone, then smiled. “Mister Friend, I promise you, as I did to María, to keep a close eye on the baby.” She crossed the hallway.

“Thank you very much, nurse.” As wary as Ruiz was of breaking rules, Jake was pleased to have her support. “Oh, nurse Ruiz, can I use a phone?” he called to her.

She turned and told him it wasn’t permitted, that he had to go to the lobby or to a pay phone by the vending machines. He hurried out to emergency with his notebook; it had the number on the inside cover. Jake used the dollar changer, then called the service, leaving messages for both doctors.

He snooped around and discovered a side door next to a board with MEDICAL STAFF inscribed above. Names with titles were at the left, including the two doctors and a list of nurses and technicians. A white square was lit up by seven names—McNally’s, four nurses, and two technicians. Jake sat by the board on an upholstered bench under a SMOKING AREA sign. He waited there for a while, hoping to catch McNally when he checked out.

Jake spent the next hour or so wearing a path between the side door, the nursery, the nurses’ station and Tina, who was asleep again. He tried once to get information from the nursery helper; she would only say, “You’ll have to talk to the nurses, sir.” He watched Emma for at least a few minutes every time he came by; her breathing was still fast, but it didn’t seem worse.

He checked again to see if McNally’s light was still on, and then found Nurse Ruiz in the nursery. After she invited him to come in, Jake washed his hands and walked over to his daughter. Emma was awake and very still, except her chest contracted like an oblong balloon rapidly losing and gaining air. He touched her soft tiny palm; she grabbed the finger as before, but her eyes seemed glazed. “C’mon, cry,” Jake whispered to her. “Cry, Emma.” After another minute or so, she closed her eyes; Jake left, keeping himself from crying.

On each of his “rounds,” Jake waited several minutes at the in-out board and then a couple more at a door near the operating area. Apparently, an emergency nurse was also in there; her area was vacant, and a sign directed patients to the lobby. Down the hall from the board, he discovered a second side entrance and a punch clock for MAINT/JANITORIAL. He spotted a card in the rack with MARÍA R. at the top. *Right, some janitor.*

Not long before noon, Jake finally found the charge nurse standing at the station, blank-faced and mumbling to Ruiz, who mutely waited at attention,

looking like she wanted to get away. He was in his mid-forties, nearly bald, about five-nine and slim, in loose light blue scrubs. Jake approached as Ruiz left; the charge nurse sat down. His badge said, I. MONSON, R.N.; he stared at some papers as if Jake were not there. A day's black whiskers spiked from his chin, blotchy with pink psoriasis.

"Excuse me, you must be the charge nurse."

"That's right." He made no eye contact.

"I'm Jake Friend; I have some concerns about our baby."

"I know." He still didn't look up.

Friggin' zombie. "Her breathing, uh—"

"María," the nurse said, and just continued to read.

"Excuse me?"

Sneering, Monson finally looked up at Jake. "María told you all this."

"No, my wife noticed first."

"María's a troublemaker." He smirked as if Jake should know better. "Doesn't even get that her name sounds like marijuana." He sniggered with a straight face.

"Oh, I think she probably does."

"Mm, so that's the way it's going to be."

What?

Pointing at Jake, Monson's Old Glory tattoo showed on his skinny upper arm. "Look, Mister Friend." He retracted his index finger. "I'll repeat what you already know. You have a big healthy baby who's breathing at high-normal range. That's about it."

Okay, just consider it might not be as bad as María thinks. That would be good, right?

Monson lowered with a sour face as if he had heartburn. "Well?"

"I'd still like McNally to see her while he's here."

"I already gave him the information. He said the baby's levels are okay, and to encourage liquids," Monson said factually, starting to jot something down.

"So he's gone?" Jake was talking to the top of the nurse's balding head.

"That's right."

"I'd like a doctor to check her sometime today."

"Nope, Serna's off Saturdays after rounds; McNally's on call the rest of today." The nurse raised his head slowly. "And the only way *he's* coming back is for an emergency, or if I call him." He went on writing. "We're monitoring the baby, Mister Friend."

How reassuring. "Who's on call tomorrow?"

"Serna."

“Okay, just so you know—I’m not leaving; I’ll be watching our baby for any changes.”

Monson didn’t look up. “Suit yourself. Now let me do my work.”

Shit. Jake walked down the hall to Tina; she was still asleep. *Nothing you can do here, either.* He checked Emma, then went back to the pay phone. He called the doctors’ service again and insisted on leaving another message for Serna; the woman was short with Jake, telling him the doctor wouldn’t get it until the next morning.

Now what? He returned to Emma and stood there watching until his eyes grew heavy. Jake walked out to the lobby and sat on a long couch. A few people came in and out, most of them stopping at the information desk manned by the receptionist and the elderly watchman who apparently didn’t know he yelled to everyone. A frail old woman was there to visit with him, or perhaps just to stay out of the heat.

Jake watched a young nun in a full white and black habit glide out of the chapel, the bottom seam of her skirt buffing the shiny linoleum. She saw him, stopped, and then reflexively held her cross. The sister smiled and raised her eyebrows, as if inviting him to talk.

No thanks, lady. He turned away; she left, and Jake stared through the plate glass window at two mourning doves. Taking shade in a maple, they weren’t as rotund as other doves he had seen. The parched birds lifted their ash grey wings without opening them—for better circulation, Jake assumed. *Must be young; born in the spring, before the heat—smart.*

Deciding that he was too far from Emma and wasn’t resting anyway, Jake went to the family waiting room, took the two straight-backed cushioned chairs and lugged them down to the nursery window. He sat in one, put his feet up on the other and watched Emma, considering a course of action in case she became noticeably worse. The new helper tried the bottle for a while, then made a gesture to Jake with a finger and thumb to indicate that Emma had taken very little.

He walked down the hall to Tina, who was awake, facing the window again. Jake went around to the visitor’s chair and saw she was still groggy. “You look a little better, cutie.” *Liar.*

She had difficulty focusing on him. “I feel like sleeping all the time.”

He saw a tray by the bed, the main dish covered. “Did you eat?”

“A little.” She paused several seconds. “That male nurse said to eat or get it in the vein.”

“I bet that’s how he said it, too.”

“I don’t remember.”

"Emma drank a little. The doctor will see her again soon." *Maybe.*

"Good." Tina's eyelids drooped. "Where's María?"

"She's off until four."

"Oh, I forgot." Her eyes were getting heavy again. "Jake, sorry; I'm so sleepy."

"Of course, you rest." He stood, kissed her on the forehead, and moved to the foot of the bed. "I'll check in on you," he said, but she had already closed her eyes.

He walked into the hall. *Jesus, she's beyond sleepy. Ask Serna about that, too.* Jake passed the nurses' station, it was vacant again; he was glad he didn't have to see Monson. He went into the men's bathroom and almost dozed off on the toilet.

Jake washed up and walked back to the nursery, where both babies were asleep; the helper was nowhere in sight, but a man in a white T-shirt and jean overalls stood at the window, staring in. He was about five-six and held a worn green cap at his stomach as he put a gnarled, calloused hand on the glass. His dark, sun-withered face seemed to droop with exhaustion.

Can't tell if he's thirty or fifty. "Is María yours?" Jake pointed from the baby to the man, in case he didn't speak English. The man turned, softening his countenance with a faint smile; Jake decided he was much younger than fifty.

"Yes, María number three," he said in clear English. "María Juana, María Isabel, and now María Elena is almost ready to go home."

"I take it your first María is named after the lady who works here? She's your neighbor, right?"

"Yes." He grinned. "All three are named after her. You must be the other father; María told me a little about you. *Jorge Cruz, a sus órdenes.*" He reached out, now with a full smile; they shook hands.

"*Mucho gusto, Jorge; I'm Jake.*"

"She told me you speak Spanish."

"Yeah, *más o menos.*"

"We've known María since we were kids. My wife even wanted to name our boy after her; use her uncle's name, María de Santiago. I talked her out of that one. How's your baby doing? She's sure a nice big girl."

Jake nodded politely. "María and my wife are worried about her a little, but nobody else seems to be."

Jorge sighed. "I can't tell you your business, but if María's a little worried, *I'd* be a little worried."

"Okay, I'll remember that."

"Well, I'm going to get my wife packed up." He turned to go.

“Gracias, Jorge.”

“Buena suerte, señor.”

Jake watched Jorge walk around the corner and down the hall. Noticing that it was just before two o'clock, he propped his legs up on the chair again, staring at Emma's pulsing chest cavity for a long time before his lack of sleep finally caught up with him.



Jake opened his eyes when he heard the hiss of a closing door. Standing up, he looked at the wall clock. *Man, almost four.* He turned to the nursery.

María was looking up to say something to the blonde woman, who then came out into the hall and turned for the back exits. The other baby was gone; María nodded to Jake, then placed both of her hands on Emma's chest for several seconds. He noticed that María's fingers, light mocha brown and creviced, were very long for such a small woman. She then caressed the baby's arms and feet studiously before feeling around her head. Emma moved weakly to her touch; María glanced at Jake with a trace of a smile.

Well, she must not be any worse. María held up one finger to indicate she would come out soon to talk.

Jake pointed down the hall to show that he was going to see Tina. At the station, a young redheaded nurse's assistant asked if she could help him. After Jake identified himself, she said in an upbeat but serious tone that Tina had been awake a while, crocheting before she went back to sleep. Jake thanked her then looked in on Tina, who was still dozing.

As soon as he returned to the nursery, María started to come out, leaning on the glass door. Jake hurried over to open it for her.

“¿How is your wife, Señor Fren?”

“Maybe a little better, gracias.” They moved over to the viewing window.

“I visit her again soon.”

“She will be happy to see you. ¿How is Emma?”

“More or less the same. ¿What did the doctor say?”

“I left messages for both of them, two times. I cannot get either one to check her.”

The old woman shook her head and tsked, baring her crooked, chipped but clean teeth. *“It is good she is not worse, but she still has problems.”*

“Señora, I do not know what else to do.”

“I understand.” She looked at Emma intently again, then turned back to him. *“The chief nurse is a problem; he is taking a double turn for the holiday.”*

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

"Eight more hours?" he asked incredulously in English.

María made an atypical sigh. "*Sí. I will try to work mostly with the other nurses. After he leaves at midnight, maybe the next chief nurse will call the doctor. But I do not yet know which one is coming.*"

"¿How many chief nurses are there?"

"*Four. Please do not say this to anyone, but I have confidence only in two of them.*"

"¿What if Emma gets worse before midnight?"

"*This Monson will only call if it is very serious.*"

"¿If she gets worse and he won't call, do you have any ideas?"

"*They have to bring a doctor if you sign papers to take her from here.*"

"¿To the university?"

"*Sí, I hear that is the best place.*"

"*We will probably do that if she is worse. For now, I will leave another message for the doctor.*"

"*Está bien.*" María turned to the baby.

"¿Señora, do you know where Doctor Serna lives?"

"*Sí. Los jardines.*"

"La Cholla Gardens?"

She nodded. "*Eso.*" María stepped toward the nursery door. "¿Por qué, señor?"

"*Nada. I just want to know.*" Jake turned and walked quickly toward emergency. *In case I have to go get him.*

24

Jake went to the pay phone and made the call to the service again. He spoke to the same cranky woman; eventually she allowed him to reword messages to both doctors. Jake tried to convey the seriousness of Emma's condition without sounding like an alarmist.

His stomach growled, so he stopped at the four vending machines, the small hospital's only option for hungry visitors. Jake used the changer again, then started feeding coins into a machine with snacks on corkscrew prongs. He saw the glass façade of the machine reflecting the image of SAINT CONCEPCION EMERGENCY from the door behind. Jake selected corn chips, the prong rotated but the bag hung up and didn't fall.

"Shit," he said aloud. *Damn place, nothing works right.* He struck the machine hard with his palm, the glass skewed from its frame, settling at an angle; the bag of chips clunked into the bin below. He stared at his deed unbelievably, then pushed the bin; it wouldn't open. *Great, mad man, you broke the friggin' thing.* Jake bought root beer and a candy bar from the other machines, walked over to the bench at the medical staff exit and sat by the in-out board without looking at it.

So, what are you going to tell them about their damn machine? He opened the can of soda, peeled back the peanut-caramel bar; took a bite and then a drink. *Just pay for it after all this is over.* Jake nibbled and sipped while glaring at a nearby door sign that said: STAFF HALLWAY ONLY. *Serve them right if somebody who doesn't read English just walked in on an operation.*

He put the soda on the floor, took the rest of the candy out of the wrapper and got up to insert the paper in the side of a black trash cylinder with a chrome ashtray on top. Jake turned back to the bench and saw the light was on by McNally's name. *Didn't see that—damn it.* He left the candy on the pop can and dashed past emergency, then down the hallway to the nursery.

María was trying a bottle with Emma; he opened the door, poked his head in and quietly asked if McNally had been there. She said he hadn't, so Jake went right to the nurses' station, where Monson was on the phone, laughing. It was the first time Jake had seen the man smile.

"The one-five combo hit at ninety to one?" the charge nurse asked someone gleefully. "What were the odds on each dog?" He paused. "No kidding? Man, a hundred and eighty bucks on a twelve-dollar bet, not too bad."

This is some important crap. Jake stood right in front of the charge nurse and saw a brochure by the phone; it had a photo print of an emaciated greyhound on front.

Looking at Jake, Monson's grin vanished. "I gotta go. Yeah, later." He hung up, pulling out a file drawer from the right side of his desk. "What is it now, Mister Friend?"

"McNally's in the hospital."

Monson fingered through the plastic tabs. "No, I'd bet he's gone by now."

"What? You know I wanted him to check Emma. Why is he here?"

The nurse extracted a file. "Checking the patient he operated on; not that it's any of your concern." Monson looked up. "He called, and I told him there was no change with your baby—which is a fact, Mister Friend."

"Did you talk to María?"

"You mean María?" He pronounced it Muh-ree-uh. "Not if I can help it—I have work to do."

"Yeah, on your damn racing form." Jake turned to go.

"What's your problem, buddy?" the nurse replied as Jake walked away. "You stay the hell outta my face," Monson added in a low grumble, but Jake heard him.

Forget that asshole—maybe McNally's still around. He ran by the nursery back down the hall to the staff exit, but the light was off by the doctor's name.

"Son of a bitch!" he shouted. Jake turned and kicked the black cylinder with his heel; the chrome tray dislodged and clanged onto the linoleum, a wisp of ash and some butts settling onto the floor. He exhaled deeply. *Great, that solves everything.* Jake stood the cylinder upright, replaced the tray, and swept the little mess into his palm.

"What happened, sir?" said a voice from behind. It was the emergency room nurse, a small Anglo woman in her fifties, wearing the ubiquitous light blue scrubs.

"Accidentally knocked it over." He brushed the ash and butts off his hands into the tray. "Why in hell does a hospital encourage people to smoke?"

"Excuse me, sir?"

“Sorry—nothing.”

“Are you waiting for someone on staff?”

“Uh, yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

The woman creased her brows but left, and Jake sat on the bench again, taking a sip of root beer. *No choice, you’ve gotta give it a try.* Jake got up, threw away the rest of the candy, and started back down the main hallway.

When Jake came to the nursery, María was wielding a huge mop in wide swaths over the floor; he realized she was remarkably fit for her age. Jake motioned for her to come out, then opened the door. She walked into the hallway.

“¿Any change, señora?”

She brushed aside a strand of grey hair that somehow had escaped her net. “*Not better or worse, señor.*”

“*I am going to leave for a while, to try to get Serna.*”

“¿How can you do that?”

“*I am not sure. ¿Do you have a phone in the nursery?*”

“*Sí, but the bell is shut off.*” María unclipped a pen from her pocket. “*You can call the nurse in emergency; she will come for me if she can.*” Jake handed her his notebook, and María wrote down the number.

“*Está bien, señora. I am going to try to call you every hour to check on the baby and my wife.*”

She nodded. “*I hope you find him, señor.*”



It was nearly six o’clock when Jake turned into La Cholla Gardens; he could feel that it was still around a hundred degrees, though the heat didn’t concern him. He drove past the portal and its perfect little flower garden into the development. He came to the lawyer’s English Tudor he saw before from a distance; it was grandiose and fussy looking, like some houses Jake had seen in Beverly Hills. This place probably had twenty rooms surrounded by at least five acres of tidy lawn and garden.

Why does anyone need something like that? Screw it; doesn’t matter. He drove slowly past two smaller but opulent residences, checking names on the mailboxes. Jake came to a sprawling one-level multi-bedroom home, its siding and shake roof made of stained cedar, with an open four-car garage. A vintage white Corvette convertible and a new blue pickup were parked inside; the last two spaces were empty, lacking even ordinary garage junk like boxes or toys, except for one old bicycle leaning against a wall. Jake stopped to look more closely.

The estate was a “ranch” in every sense; complete with barns, grazing horses, and thousands of feet of white corral fence around the perimeter of about twenty acres. For a porch, the house had a dozen posts the size of tree trunks supporting a fifty-foot wide veranda enclosed by white wagon wheels. A long driveway led up to the place past a half acre front yard of river rock with a wind-break of immature blue spruce and Austrian pine. Mostly lawn and alfalfa took up the far side of the land, save a long strip of flower garden nearer the home.

Out at the curb, a cedar miniature of the house, actually a large mailbox, had SERNAS written cursively on top in wrought iron. *The right Sernas?* Jake took out his binoculars from behind the seat and read the customized frame around one license plate: DOC'S 58 - VETTE ROADSTER.

So now what's your great plan? He drove Loretta about forty yards down the street, parked before the next home under a willow and shut off the motor. *What the hell, just go.* Jake got out, walked back to Serna's place and then up to his eight-foot, heavily varnished, pine front door with a black iron handle. He pressed a button on the wall and heard a series of loud melodic chimes. *Man, that'd wake the dead.* He pressed it again, but no one came to the door. *Crap—wait him out.*

Jake returned to Loretta, put his sweaty Cub's hat on the seat, and waited there in the shade, watching the house. After fifteen minutes or so, some sprinklers started in the pastures, and a short man with a thick roll around his belly rode a lady's balloon-tire bicycle away from the irrigation. In all-white cotton and a straw hat, he coasted into the garage, leaned his bike against the other one, and then walked out past the flower garden.

Jake squinted toward the man. *I'll be, it's Justino's father—talk about overqualified for farm work.* He donned his cap, got out of Loretta, and headed for Mister Hernandez, who stopped on the lawn when he saw his boys' teacher approach.

As he walked, Jake recalled speaking to Hernandez after the fight and finding out that he was once a law clerk in Mexico. He was also impressed that Hernandez didn't look down on recent arrivals, as did some other “settled-in” immigrants. It bothered Jake that Justino had somehow not followed his father's example.

“Maestro, what are you doing here?” Hernandez asked, surprised but friendly. He had a light complexion like his sons, and the man's English syntax was far superior to his pronunciation, which Jake knew wasn't unusual for a bright person learning English as an adult.

He reached out to shake hands. “Hi, Mister Hernandez; I was just waiting to talk to the doctor.”

“Ah, let’s go to the shade.” His sentence sounded like *Les go to di chade*. He pointed to where the house’s shadow almost reached the garden; they started that way. “I am Doctor Serna’s foreman, maestro. He is on a car trip with his wife and daughter,” he said in his thick accent, again with all the right words. “I am not sure when he will return. Maybe after dark.”

Damn. “I see.” They passed the immaculate flowerbed, thick with tall stalks of white, pink, and magenta cosmos. Entering the shade, Hernandez’s long-sleeve white shirt was nearly free of perspiration, while Jake could feel his T-shirt was nearly soaked from the short walk.

Jake turned to him. “I just need to leave him a note. His message service isn’t very helpful.”

“I can put the note on the door inside the garage before we close up.”

“That would be great. How are your boys doing?”

“Ricardo is studying; Justino, he works here with me.” He pointed to the barns.

“Oh? And college?”

“He will work all summer for the clothes and things, or he receives no help from me for the college. I want the boy to learn here, too.”

Smart man. “I think he will.”

“You have the message, maestro?”

He wants to go, Jake. “In my truck. I’ll be right back.” He walked quickly out of the shade down to the street; Hernandez picked up an iron rod and twisted on some lawn sprinklers. Jake jogged to Loretta, got in and found his notebook. He ripped out a page, put it on the cover and wrote the message:

Doctor Serna,

Sorry to interrupt your Saturday; it was my idea for Mr. Hernandez to leave this note for you. We are very concerned about our baby’s condition—one of your staff agrees with us. I know you are not on call tonight, but please call the charge nurse and ask to speak with me in the nursery. Thanks for your time.

Jake Friend

He folded the paper, got out, and started up the street. Both Justino and Mister Hernandez were standing by their bikes when Jake came into the garage. He saw the young man was clothed like his father, except his white shirt and pants were soiled with manure.

“Hi, maestro,” Justino said, shoulders drooping, but he looked more tired than self-conscious.

"Hi, Justino. Looks like you're working pretty hard for that college money."

"I think college is easy after this," he answered with a nod, no sign of his usual surliness.

Jake handed the note to Mister Hernandez. "I told the doctor the message was my idea."

"Okay, maestro, I put it on the kitchen door," Hernandez told him, already moving around the Corvette.

"*Gracias, señor,*" he said as Justino reached up for the garage door. "Say hi to Ricardo," Jake added, walking away. He crossed the street and saw charcoal-and-white thunderheads loom above the hills, growing straight up into the blue sky. He turned to see Justino and his dad pedal away down the street.

Better call María. He got in, drove out of the development and down the hill, passing the two bikes with a *beep* from Loretta. At the small corner market, Jake called the emergency room nurse on a pay phone. María came on after two or three minutes and told him there was still no change; Monson and Ruiz were the only ones who had checked the baby. He asked if she had a chance to look in on Tina; María said that during her visit la señora ate some dinner and was knitting again.

Jake thanked her, then went inside the store. He chose a turkey sandwich, an apple, and put his hand on a six-pack of beer. *Bad idea. One won't hurt.* He bought the single beer and a diet pop before driving back up to Serna's. The storm was closing in with wind and a few drops of rain when he got there.

By the time he ate the sandwich and enjoyed his beer, a lightning bolt seemed to crack right overhead, followed only seconds later by loud rolling thunder, then a few splats on the windshield.

Geez, nothing safer than a car, right? Facing Serna's closed garage and waiting for the next violent peal from the disturbed atmosphere, Jake let the cool ozone blow across the front seat as he bit into the apple. Moments later, another strike brought with it a slanting torrent of rain. He reluctantly rolled up his windows, leaving the wind-wings open. The downpour pecked Loretta's steel roof like hail on an aluminum awning.

Jake watched the dark house and the weather until the storm eventually moved on. He lowered the windows to enjoy the cool air settling over the neighborhood. It was dusk by the time he drove off to call María.

At the grocery, he waited again for her to come on the line. After reporting no changes, María told him she agreed to cover for a helper who had an emergency. They were letting her off at ten; she would return at six in the morning for the first of two holiday shifts. She told him that Denise, the lady

who was on all night, was a helpful person who would answer his calls. María tried to encourage Jake, reminding him that Monson would be gone at midnight.

Jake headed up for the big market, hoping to find some flowers Tina would like. He passed the city park, partly roped off because they were setting up fireworks for the next evening. Jake heard from Jesús that the two La Cholla mayors had worked it out with U.S. Immigration for the citizens of La Cholla, Mexico to cross the border after the parade to enjoy the American fireworks. Captain LeBlanc, Jesús said, wasn't happy about the arrangement.

At Ortega's store they displayed flag-embossed pots of red and white carnations with blue foil stars. Jake paid extra to have the clerk make a special bouquet of red carnations and baby's breath in a white vase; he bought the flowers with a Saturday newspaper from Tucson.

Instead of going back through town, Jake traversed the valley, then drove down to the hospital. He went first to the nursery and watched María trying to feed the baby; she smiled at the flowers for Tina and made a hand gesture showing that Emma had taken a little from the bottle. Jake walked right by Monson and took the bouquet into Tina.

With the television on but muted, Tina was awake and crocheting, her right hand in an up-down motion steady as an oil well pump.

"Hi, Tina." He kissed her cheek and put the flowers on the rolling adjustable table. "Is the afghan going to be for Emma?"

"No, it's too big." She concentrated on the crochet hook as the yarn steadily unwound from the medium-blue skein. Tina glanced up at the bouquet, smiled weakly, and went right back to her project. "Thank you, they're pretty, even if they are dead."

"What?"

"Cut flowers, perfect for funerals."

Good God.

"Sorry." Tina stared at her busy hands. "I probably never told you I don't care for cut flowers."

Jesus, Jake, you knew that. "No, I forgot; I'll find you a live plant."

"Please don't bother."

Jake moved the bouquet to the floor and tried to think of a different subject. Though he didn't want to report his failure to bring a doctor for Emma, Jake decided to tell her if she asked. He tried talking about hospital inanities—the food, noise, nurses and so on—but Tina only looked at him once, as if he were a stranger. Finally, he told her he saw Emma drinking a little more.

She put the hook down, raising her head. "I won't pretend she's okay,

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

Jake; she isn't. Why don't they listen to María? They just keep saying how big the baby is." She picked up her crocheting and fell right back into rhythm.

"I know; I'm tired of hearing that, too." He paused. "We both trust María, but don't forget she isn't a nurse."

Tina began to tie off a six-foot-long blue strip. "She's only been right all along." She glowered at her work.

"Yeah, it sure seems like it." *She's pissed, just go.* "I guess I'll say good night then; I'll check Emma again on my way out."

Tina started on a white strip. "What good will that do?" Her rhetorical question was barely audible.

Not much. "Uh, I hope you rest okay. I'll see you first thing in the morning."

"Good night." She didn't look up.

He kissed her inert lips just long enough to know she was indifferent. Jake stood up, watching her crochet steadily, as if he had already left.

Jesus. "Uh, you didn't tell me who the afghan's for."

She kept working. "María."

"I'm sure she'll like it." He patted her arm and walked out into the hall with the bouquet at his side.

25

Jake came first to the young redheaded nurse's assistant who was enduring an entire shift with Monson; he gave her the flowers, saying they made Tina sneeze. He left through a side exit to avoid Monson and the nursery, deciding he had pestered María enough for a while.

Driving back to La Cholla Gardens, Jake saw Mister Hernandez ahead in Loretta's headlights, pedaling out to the portal. *Let him go by. Too late, he saw you.* Jake pulled up to Hernandez, who had to jump forward off his rusty bike to completely stop it.

"Maestro."

"Señor, I'm on my way to town," he fibbed. "You want to put your bike in back? I can run you down there."

"*No gracias.* I need exercise." He poked himself in the paunch and grinned.

"Were you just up at Doctor Serna's?"

"Yes, to turn off everything; the rain finish my work for me. He is not yet home."

"Oh," Jake said, as if it didn't matter. "*Pues, adiós, señor.*" He put Loretta back in gear.

"*Adiós, maestro.*" Hernandez waved; Jake pretended he was going downtown, losing him after two blocks. He circled around, drove back up to Serna's and parked under the willow again, though it was dark now and relatively cool.

He sat there a while, focused on Serna's nightlight in the kitchen. Jake tried to divert his thoughts by reading the sports section with his flashlight to find out how the Cubs were doing. After he realized he had perused the Major League standings several times, Jake decided to try to catch María before she left.

This time he called from the gas station's pay phone after filling Loretta's

tank. He had made it there just before closing, surprised it was already ten o'clock. Jake got in touch with Denise, María's replacement, who tried to be helpful, as María said she would. Denise reported nothing new with Emma.

Jake drove off for the Gardens again. He turned in at the entrance and drove by the first three homes slowly before he saw Serna's open garage, a dark-colored Cadillac by the Corvette, and some lights on in the house. *It's ten thirty—now what do you do?* He drove up to the willow, turned around, and stopped. *Emma's the same; maybe I'm making too much out of this. Crap, how are you supposed to know? So, right up to the door, or go wait for his call?*

He rolled by the house in first gear, looking in. When he saw most of the lights were off again, Jake kept going, turned left at the portal, and drove down to the hospital. He hurried in and went straight to the nurses' station. Monson raised his head and groaned.

"Well, if it isn't Mister Friend."

"Did Doctor Serna call?"

"Yes. You left a note there, for criminy sake?"

"So? What did he say?"

"What do you think he said? He asked if there were any changes, and I told him there weren't." Shaking his head, Monson checked some papers on the counter.

Back off a little, Jake. He sighed. "All right, do you have my home phone number?"

"Of course." He looked up. "Does this mean you're actually going home for a while?" he asked in a half-hearted attempt at a more friendly tone.

Like you give a damn. "Yeah, I guess so. Did my wife go to sleep?"

"Yes, she finally put the knitting away."

"Okay, I'm going. You'll let me know if there's any change?"

Monson's phone rang. "Yes, Mister Friend; good night." He waved at Jake dismissively and picked up the receiver. "This is Monson."

El pendejo. Jake went down the hall and looked in on Tina; she was snoring very softly, the afghan on her lap. Jake moved closer but didn't touch her. *Jesus, has she ever been through the wringer.*

Holding off tears again, he left the room, passed Monson, and came to the nursery. Jake watched Emma's constant panting until he caught himself daydreaming. He chatted with the lean helper, Denise, who had translucent liver-spotted skin. She was inches taller and years younger than María, but she seemed very frail. Before Jake left, he was impressed that Denise made sure that she had his correct phone number.

He walked outside, climbed into Loretta, and just sat there behind the

steering wheel. *Maybe I shouldn't leave. No, Denise is okay. May as well get some sleep; get back here early before morning rounds.*

He debated with himself on the way to Sofia, nearly turning around once. Jake saw lights at Juanito's house and stopped to see if he could get Fiera. As he walked to the door, he noticed there were no rain puddles, and it felt like it was still ninety degrees, bugs flying and crawling everywhere. The Montalvos were watching the end of a Bicentennial special on TV. Jake apologized for the late hour and told them only that Tina and the baby were okay.

Juanito brought Fiera in from the yard; she jumped on Jake, licking him even more than usual, as if he were Tina. He arranged to drop the dog off in the morning, then drove over to the rental; Ben was there, watering in the dark. Jake got out with Fiera; the dog dashed over to Ben, who patiently withstood the same slobbery treatment.

"Hey, Ben."

"Hi, maestro. How is la maestra; the baby?"

"Okay, thanks. Sergeant Ramos told you?"

"No, Señor Montalvo." He kept flooding the tomatoes.

"Kind of late to water; it didn't rain here at all?"

"Only a little. I come here for this; I stay at Mauricio's last night."

"Party time?"

"*Fútbol*, two games; we win Friday and tonight."

"Oh, right, I forgot—good for you guys. Ben, that's enough for now. The rest can wait; come on in."

"Okay, maestro."

After Jake lowered the thermostat, they chatted in front of the TV for a while, Ben telling him he would like to visit the hospital the next day. Before bed, Jake called Monson and had a pithy verbal exchange similar to their previous ones. He hung up and unwound the long line, leaving the telephone in the hall outside their bedroom. While he began to undress for a shower, the phone rang.

Geez, it's almost midnight. He walked to the phone. *Can't be the hospital.* "Hello?"

"Jake, what's going on?"

"Hannah?"

"I called five times; your sisters and I are going nuts—especially them."

"Sorry, just got back. Tina had the baby." He told her the basic information; she interrupted to exclaim or congratulate after each detail. Jake didn't mention there were any problems.

"So tell me what's wrong, Jake."

"What?"

"Jesus, it's me, Huey; what's going on?"

Man. "Okay. Tina and one of the nurses' helpers are worried that Emma's too quiet and breathing too fast, but the nurses say the rate is high-normal. The doctor agrees and won't come back to check her."

"Damn it, you have to make him."

"That's what I'm trying to do." Jake described some of the measures he already tried. ". . . and he's supposed to be there for rounds in the morning."

"I think he's negligent, Jake. You want me to come down there?"

No! "Uh, no thanks, I've got it handled. Do me a favor, Hannah; call Caroline and Joyce but don't mention any complications, especially since we're not sure."

"You're right. They'd go nuts."

"Please tell them, uh, that I'll call soon."

"I'll take care of it."

"Thanks, Sis. I don't mean to cut you short, but I should get some sleep."

"Good idea. Jake, you have to promise to keep in touch, or I'll just fly down there."

"All right, I'll call when I know something new."

After they disconnected, Jake took a shower and went to bed. Fiera somehow knew it was okay this night to jump up on the sheets and rest her moist snout right on Jake's arm. He rubbed her ears and fell asleep.

Jake dreamt again; this time he was driving around a posh suburb, looking for Serna until Loretta was stopped by a flash flood of bizarre detritus gurgling down a wash. He saw frolicking swimmers float by in a huge round plastic swimming pool followed by a Pontiac bobbing up and down, some Linn relatives smiling and gawking out of the windows like tourists. Then came an entire dislodged front yard with Mister Hernandez dressed in a business suit, pruning trees as he passed by. Finally, Jake watched a flotilla of white corral fencing; Ben and Justino were clinging to the wood for their lives.

Jake's alarm went off before six; he had set it to coincide with María's coming back on duty. He sat up with vague images in his mind of white fences in a turbulent arroyo. *Man, that was weird.* Jake made himself get up right away. He put on Bermudas and a clean summer shirt, then called emergency and was relieved to hear the same helpful nurse answer. He asked for María and waited for her again.

"Mister Friend," the emergency nurse said, "María can't get away."

"Is something wrong?"

"She's just very busy. I asked about your daughter; they said she's about the same."

“Thanks, nurse.” *That’s good, I guess.* “The doctors’ rounds are about seven, right?”

“There are no Sunday rounds, Mister Friend—only if they’re called in.”

“What? No one told me that.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

Damn it to hell. “It’s not your fault.” His mind went blank, as if he’d been struck in the head; he felt lost and isolated for several moments.

“Mister Friend?”

Jesus, pull yourself together. “Yes, sorry. Uh, please tell María I’ll try to be there before nine. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll let her know.”

“Bye.” He hung up. *Go get the bastard.* Jake woke Ben to tell him he would call later. He asked Ben to drop off Fiera at the Montalvos.

On the drive to town, he was watching the dawn of what would be a hot Fourth of July when he heard a dull thumping under the back of the truck. *What the hell?* Jake pulled over, got out and found a rear tire almost flat.

“Piss!” he yelled to the desert, “up a goddamned rope.” *Focus, for God’s sake.* He jumped back in and coasted off the slight crown to level ground, well off the road. After Jake started fooling with the jack, lug wrench and the spare, he heard a twig snap in the nearby palo verde; his nose picked up a thick wave of musk. A car zipped by; Jake heard a grunt. He looked up and thought he saw a sow and two half-grown piglets, backed into some dead branches not even ten feet away. Jake realized they were hairy with pointed noses; the snarling mother had a white collar of fur.

My God, javelina. Bad timing—gotta go. The mother was pissed and didn’t back off, so Jake put his tools down in the dirt, backed slowly away from the cornered animals and quietly said, “It’s okay, momma, I won’t bother you.” Before Jake’s heel touched the asphalt, the mother peccary thrashed off into the bush, her babies behind. He ran back down to Loretta and changed the tire with no problems.

Jake drove into town, up the hill, and turned into La Cholla Gardens. He parked under the same willow, glaring at a dull kitchen light in Serna’s otherwise dark home.

When another light comes on, go to the door. He waited; it was after seven thirty when one of the bedroom shades brightened. *Give them enough time to wake up.* Jake got out of Loretta, stealthily left the door ajar so it wouldn’t make noise, and leaned on the truck’s bed.

No damn excuses—he’s going to listen. After a few minutes, he began walking up the street. Before Jake got to Serna’s, a La Cholla squad car

approached. The officer wore dark glasses, though the sun hadn't cleared the hills.

Great, it's Sánchez. Jake had seen the corporal previously only from a distance, knew he was very short, and guessed he was sitting now on some sort of pillow or booster. Jesús had confided to Jake that Sanchez was a south Texan who wished he had never left the military, for all the wrong reasons. Jesús, a veteran himself, also told Jake that he always tried to be on different shifts from the corporal.

The officer U-turned and stopped his vehicle between Jake and Serna's place, rolling down his window. Jake took some slow steps toward him. Sanchez, about thirty, wore his flat-brimmed hat like a Marine, its strap back on his neck below a buzz cut. Reflective sunglasses covered about a third of the corporal's small, light-tan face.

"What's yr' business here, sir—ain't you a teacher?" he asked, his nose wrinkling as if he smelled something bad.

"Yes. Is there some problem, officer *Sánchez*?" Jake pronounced his surname in Spanish.

"It's Sanchez." He said, SANN-chiz. "How come you know my name?"

My kids all know your name. "You work with my neighbor, Jesús Ramos."

"That right? So what's yr' business here?"

"Uh, I'm just going to visit Doctor Serna."

"It's before oh-eight hundred. You tellin' me he's expectin' a visit?"

"No, I just need to talk to him about a problem at the hospital."

"That a problem he wants to hear about?"

Damn. "Yes, I think so, but you'd have to ask Doctor Serna." *Yeah, go get him for me.*

"Nope, ain't gonna happen. You need t' call the doc for permission to be here."

"I've been trying to call him for more than a day."

"That's sorta too bad; this here's private property. That's yr' green truck over there," he stated, craning his skinny neck out for a better look at Loretta.

"Yes."

He sniggered. "Guess it's a truck—surprised you ain't painted no flowers on it. Believe I seen it in town with wetbacks."

Friggin' yokel. "Yeah, my students; I smuggle them over the border."

Sanchez lowered his glasses enough to reveal squinty olive-green eyes. "You ain't bein' no wise-ass with me, are ya', teach?"

That was stupid, Jake. He sighed, shook his head and turned to the flaring sunrise just over the horizon.

Sanchez fingered his sunglasses back in place. “Y’all listen good. Yr’ gonna go climb right up in that piece-a-crap VW an’ just drive it on outta here.”

“Wait a minute, officer, I just need—”

Sanchez pointed at him. “What you need is to go now, before yr’ under arrest for trespassin’.”

Shit. “All right, I’m leaving.”

26

Jake dialed Ben from Ortega's store, taking bites of a frosted doughnut, then a gulp of coffee, cold from all the milk he put in it. After he told Ben he was on his way, Jake left yet another message with the service. He drove on home, trying to think of some other way to contact either doctor.

Ben, dressed in his good clothes and reeking of strong aftershave, impressed Jake with the implied importance of his visit to Tina. On the ride back to the hospital, Jake tried to take his mind off Emma and Tina, telling Ben about the javelina and asking about his soccer team. He parked near an ash grove by the visitors' lot so Loretta's interior wouldn't be scalding when they returned.

Jake got his book and notebook from the back seat; they walked across the already searing asphalt into the hospital, then down the hall to the nursery. María was preoccupied in the back room; Emma wasn't with two new babies out by the window.

What the hell? Easy, she's probably in with Tina. The newborns were twin boys surnamed Flores, the card said, delivered after five A.M. by Doctor McNally. *No wonder María's so busy.*

Ben followed Jake to the nurses' station, where he was glad to see that Jaworsky, the nursing prodigy from Friday night's graveyard shift, was back on duty. In her flowing white garb again, the hefty young woman smiled at Jake as he approached.

"Good morning, Mister Friend. I called your house a while ago." She looked briefly askance at Ben.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Nothing serious. After the delivery this morning, Doctor McNally checked your daughter. As a precautionary measure, he decided to put her on some intermittent oxygen to relax the breathing a little. She's in an enclosed incubator, but the doctor says everything is still within normal range. Like I said, it's precautionary, nothing to be alarmed about."

“Okay, well, I’m glad he checked her. What do I have to do to get Serna to follow up?”

“I know this is a very busy day for him, like it is for most everybody.”

What? “Oh, the Bicentennial; I sure don’t want to disturb *that*.”

“Mister Friend, that tone isn’t helpful.”

Easy, Jake—they finally did something. “You’re right. I do appreciate everything you have been doing, nurse.”

“Thank you.”

“We’re getting pretty frustrated with Serna. After I talk to Tina, I think we’ll want to change to McNally.”

“He’s no longer on call and could be out of town.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

“No. Please believe me, Mister Friend, we do have things well in hand.” She sounded as confident as she did on the first night. “Unless things change, this can wait until Doctor Serna’s morning rounds tomorrow.”

Maybe, maybe not. “Okay, one more question please. Did you explain to my wife about the oxygen?”

“Yes, but I had to tell her twice to be sure she understood.” Jaworsky paused, pulled Jake aside, and then spoke very softly so that Ben couldn’t listen. “Mister Friend, she acted like she didn’t want to hear it. She hardly speaks to anyone, except María. I’m concerned about her.”

Good. “What is it that’s concerning you?”

“After a normal birth, depression usually comes later, if at all, but she’s already showing some classic signs.”

“Except you said ‘normal birth.’ She doesn’t think the baby’s normal; that’s why she’s so upset.”

“There’s no medical reason to support that. Perhaps you could help us to dissuade her.”

“No, I won’t try to dissuade her of anything.”

Jake’s bluntness didn’t upset Jaworsky as much this time. “That’s up to you. I believe she’s awake and crocheting again.”

“Okay; thanks. I’ll be back.” Jake took a step before he remembered Ben was with him. “Let’s go, Ben.”

“Excuse me,” the nurse said, “visiting hours for non-family—”

Jake turned to her. “He lives with us; I think that qualifies as family.”

“Very well,” Jaworsky answered with a shrug. Jake and Ben continued down the hall.

Not a word from her if he was blond. He showed Ben into the room. Jake was sure Tina saw them in her peripheral vision, but she kept crocheting bright red yarn onto the six-foot-square blue and white afghan.

"Hi, Tina." Jake pecked her on the cheek. "Ben's here."

Still with deep circles under her eyes and scant color in her face, Tina just glanced at her visitor. "Hi, Ben."

Ben, apparently upset by her appearance, shook Tina's hand. "*Felicidades, maestra,*" he mumbled. Tina forced a doleful-looking smile as she made a red border begin to appear on one edge of her project.

Geez, still out of it. Jake put his book and notebook on top of some yarn in her big purse. "Tina, I thought maybe they'd give you a roommate. There are twins in the nursery."

She ignored the comment, attentive to her crocheting.

Idiot, she doesn't want to hear that. "Man, I can't believe you decided to go Bicentennial with the afghan."

"María brought in her extra red yarn," Tina said, continuing to work. "All I can do is add a border. She doesn't know it's for her. Please don't tell her."

"Right, I won't." *Get to the point, Jake.* "Tina, I think we're finally getting somewhere with Emma, but we need to talk about it."

"Maestro," Ben said, "I go now." Not waiting for an answer, Ben bowed slightly to Tina and said, "Maestra."

Tina forced a weak smile. "You can stay, Ben."

"Thank you, no. *You need to talk,*" he said in Spanish. "I go to the truck." He turned for the door.

"Ben, it's cooler in the lobby," Jake told him. "I'll be a little while."

"*Está bien, maestro; I wait in the truck.*"

Ben left; Tina put down her project and finally looked right at Jake. "María said the oxygen isn't helping."

"What? When did she say that?"

"Maybe a half hour ago; she was only here a minute."

Damn it to hell. He turned, glowering outside at the back of the statue of Jesus on the lawn. *Yeah, invite people into this place.*

Tina nearly startled him by speaking louder than before. "So, do you believe us now?"

"Yes, I'll try again to get Serna."

"How?"

"One way or the other, I'll get him."

"Go on then, Jake, do what you can."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Me? I'm not the one who's sick." Tina scowled a little and resumed working on the afghan as Jake hurried out of the room.



The next hour would later come back to Jake as a jumbled montage of María's overwrought face, Emma's nearly limp body, Loretta hurtling downhill, and Ben jumping out before Jake could stop. After that, mostly in red, white, and blue, it was the impervious Doctor Serna waving to the Bicentennial crowd; then sullen clowns and whining Brownie Scouts followed by the sweaty atonal high school band startling the Mexican cowboys' proud horses. Jake would recall the light blue police car behind him, red lights flashing, accelerating up Garden Drive in pursuit of Loretta; and his relief upon seeing Jesús get out of the squad car. Then the mad dash over the border; the last image from probably the most frenzied hour of his twenty-seven years was of Ben, knocking futilely on Doctor Castilleja's door.



After Jake and Ben finally gave up and walked quickly away from the doctor's apartment, they suddenly stopped when they heard the door rattle. "*Paciencia, paciencia, mi paciente,*" came faintly from inside before the door opened. Ben ran back, Jake right behind. Doctor Castilleja, about Jake's height but not as heavy, stood there in charcoal slacks, a short sleeve white shirt, not tucked in, and bare feet, holding a thick manual of some kind.

Thank God. Ben can explain—less confusion.

"*Mijo,*" the doctor said through the screen to Ben in Spanish, "*it seems you have interrupted my nap to bring me a tourist.*"

"*Perdóneme, doctor, not a tourist; this is my teacher from the other side. He speaks Spanish.*"

The doctor pushed open the screen door. "*Oh? Buenas tardes, Señor, uh . . .*"

"*Friend, Jake Friend. Doctor Castilleja.*" Jake reached out. If the doctor were not wearing bifocals, Jake thought he could pass for Armando's older brother, complete with black hair down to his neck and a full rakish moustache.

They shook hands; Castilleja turned to Ben with a grin. "*It always pleases me, mijo, when one of our neighbors from the north can pronounce my name.*"

"*Con permiso, doctor,*" Ben said seriously, "*I need to tell you we were sent by María Juana Robles and . . .*"

During Ben's rapid explanation, it dawned on Jake that this was the first time he heard María's last name. He watched the doctor's face turn grave when Ben told him the baby was sick and they couldn't find Serna.

"*Okay, come in out of the heat,*" Castilleja said in English with a barely discernible accent.

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

“So, you’ll help us, doctor?” Jake asked.

“If they let me, Mister Friend. While I put on my shoes, you can tell me what’s going on with your child. Something to drink for you two?”

Jake stepped forward. “No thanks; we just had something.” As soon as they walked in, the doctor left the small living room, which was maybe ten degrees cooler than the building’s shade outside. Ben and Jake sat on a hard couch covered with a light blue chenille bedspread.

Having been in a few of his students’ homes, Jake noticed this simple apartment was missing some things he had seen in the other houses. Instead of a gallery of religious trappings and family photos, there was just one framed glossy on the doctor’s TV/stereo console. It was a shot of Castilleja’s parents, Jake assumed, standing proudly with their son in front of the multi-colored University of Mexico library building. The rest of the room had a college ambience, including a Bob Marley poster, a print of Picasso’s Don Quixote, and hundreds of books and record albums on shelves made of planks and bricks.

The doctor came back with his shoes, the shirt tucked in, carrying an old-fashioned black medical bag. He also had on a white, flat-brimmed sunhat, not like the cowboy-style straw hats Jake had seen around La Cholla.

As soon as he returned, Castilleja started grilling Jake on the baby’s condition. He sat in an armchair to put on his brown socks and shoes, keeping up the inquiries. Finally, he stood up and asked, “Was your wife overdue?”

“Yes, almost ten days. Does that mean something?”

“Perhaps. Have they done X-rays?”

“I don’t think so, doctor.”

“*Hijo*,” he said, pursing his lips as he picked up the medical bag. “I believe that’s something we would have done by now here in the Third World.”

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They left the apartment, hurried past the doctor's Karmann Ghia and got in Loretta. Jake backed up quickly into the road and headed for town, Ben in the back seat. Castilleja put the bag by his feet and looked around at the pins and duct tape holding the interior together. Jake saw the doctor's hat had a chin cord that fell to his chest like a necklace.

"I like your truck, Mister Friend, but what happened in here?"

"Our dog had a few bites. Doctor, do you have any ideas about what's going on with Emma?"

"I have one or two, uh, hunches, I think is the best word. But I don't believe it helps to guess before I see her."

Makes sense. "Right." He continued down the road as fast as he could without drawing attention. After a minute or so, Jake asked, "How free are you to be over there for a while today?"

"It should be fine, Mister Friend, as long as things stay quiet here. I am on call today but forgot to let our police know where I'm going. I need to call them when we get there."

Jake nodded. He finally came to the pavement, then the light, and turned left toward the border.

"Maestro," Ben called, "I get out now, please."

Jake slowed and looked in his rearview. "Ben, maybe they'll let you cross since you're with us."

"No, maestro, and I will use the time you need."

He's right. "Okay, Ben—where?"

"*Aquí*, the market."

Jake pulled over at a curb two blocks from the border; Ben got out.

"Thanks for your help, Ben," Jake called.

"*Nos vemos, maestro*—tomorrow maybe. *Adiós, doctor.*" Ben waved, and backed away.

Castilleja waved back as Jake pulled out into the traffic, which was light going north but still congested in the other direction.

"Do you have any problems crossing up here?" Jake asked as they went by the tourist shops.

"Depends, especially since I don't have a pass today."

Great. Jake drove slowly through the border to the shortest of three open lines on the American side and waited behind two cars. The officer let the first one go but seemed to have a lot of questions for the next car, a family in a Dodge station wagon with Oklahoma plates. *Crap, let 'em go; they're from Tulsa, for God's sake.*

"Uh, I think we have some bad luck here with this new inspector," the doctor said. "This could take a while."

"Should I back up and move to another lane?"

"No, that's asking for trouble."

Jake put the transmission in neutral and waited. *Damn it all.* He watched the intense young officer in his tidy uniform—grey trousers and a pale blue blouse with a round navy blue patch on one short sleeve. Wearing a "captain-style" flat cap with a shiny bill, he was an inch or two shy of six feet tall, blond, with a nickel-size brown mole on his face. *Great, one of the Waltons with a crew cut.* After a couple more questions, the Oklahomans were cleared; Jake pulled forward between two booths and into shade from the portal.

The young man leaned into the window; Jake saw a gold U.S. Immigration insignia on his cap, and a badge over the left pocket. The other side had a dull brass name badge that said, T. T. MEACHAM. "Happy Fourth, sir," Meacham said, not happy.

"Afternoon, officer." Jake spoke as deferentially as he could, but Meacham turned away, his eyes poring over Loretta. Jake raised a brow, looking at the doctor.

"Citizen of what country please, sir?" the inspector asked from behind.

Jake turned right back to him, accidentally slamming his upper arm into the door. *Ouch, damn it.* "United States, officer."

"Resident of Arizona?"

See my license plate, John Boy? "Yes. Sofia, Arizona—ten miles from here."

"How long were you in Mexico, sir?" He saw Jake's smudged forehead.

"Uh, maybe forty-five minutes."

"And what purchases are you bringing back?"

"None, officer, I—"

"Have you been in some sort of altercation, sir? Your arm's bleeding."

Jake looked down and saw the cut had opened. "It's just a scratch from when I reached under the seat."

"Were you putting something there, sir?"

So stupid, Jake. "No officer, I was looking for my wallet."

"Hope you found it, sir," Meacham warned, removing a small green notebook from his left chest pocket. "Your driver's license, please." Jake took out his wallet and held up the license to the young man, who jotted some information, then leaned in the window again. "Citizen of what country please, sir?" he asked Castilleja.

"La Cholla, Mexico," the doctor answered, anglicizing the words.

"Do you have one of today's fireworks passes or a local card, sir?"

"Not today, inspector."

"They're issuing the passes at your plaza; you'll have to go back and get one, sir."

"Officer," Jake said, "can I please explain? He's—"

"Sir, your passenger will have to get out, then I'd like you to pull this vehicle off to the right." He pointed to a concrete island. "Stop there, please, and turn off the motor; stand by the vehicle and wait for instructions." He spoke to Castilleja again. "Please leave the vehicle, sir, and return to the other side."

"Okay, inspector." The doctor opened his door.

Shit! "Wait a sec, he's a doctor; I'm taking him—"

"Sir, I'll ask you to comply now, please."

Watching Castilleja start away with his bag, Jake turned to the officer. "You *don't* understand," he said in a shrill tone.

"Sir, this is your final chance to comply." Meacham smirked as if he hoped Jake's disobedience would continue.

Damn it all. "All right, I'm doing it." He turned Loretta into the inspection area, parked, and saw the doctor talking to a different officer. Jake took a napkin from the glove box and got out to wait by the door. He saw Meacham in the booth; another inspector was already in his lane. Jake took María's medicine and bandages out of his pocket, wiped off the cut with the napkin and treated it.

He looked up, the doctor was gone. Meacham, now in sunglasses, hurried back to Jake. "Okay, sir, please stand back from your vehicle."

Don't make more trouble—you'll be here all day. He waited in the shade and watched Meacham unbutton most of Loretta's tarp. The inspector rifled through the tools, camping gear, even Jake's trash.

Good, John Boy's sweating. He saw Castilleja and a much older officer in an ordinary tan cowboy hat walking in Jake's direction from the nearby office; they were laughing about something. *What's going on?*

As they came closer, Jake noticed that the senior officer had likely stretched government regulations with his trimmed grey sideburns and a stiff, white handlebar moustache. The man's forest green uniform, however, looked complete—black shiny boots, neat trousers, and a short-sleeve shirt with bars on the epaulets. The revolver in his black leather holster set him off completely from the scurrying inspectors.

"Mister Friend?" the officer asked him. J. R. WILLITS was the moniker on his polished name badge.

"Yes, officer." Jake saw Meacham join them.

"You and the doctor are free to go on over."

"Sir," the young inspector said, "I haven't checked the vehicle's interior yet, sir."

"You can take your lane, Meacham. See you later, doc," Willits said to Castilleja, and started back to the office. The doctor helped Jake snap down the tarp; they got in the truck and entered La Cholla, U.S.A.

"How'd you pull that off?" Jake asked, driving through downtown at the legal maximum.

"Well, in both of our countries it often comes down to who you know or how much money's in your pocket. Next time, you might want to refrain from saying that you were under the seat," Castilleja said with a chuckle.

"Yeah, no kidding. So, how much do I owe you?"

"No, no. Agent Willits and I go way back. Put it this way, I have a Georgia friend who'd call Jim Willits 'good people,' just like we say in Spanish.

"Oh." *Georgia?* Not wanting somebody like Corporal Sanchez to complicate things, Jake increased his speed to exactly four miles per hour over the limit until he turned left on Garden, and Loretta began laboring up the hill.

"Ah, the drawback of a Volkswagen, I know it well," the doctor said.

Don't know this guy from Adam. "Uh, yeah, but your Karmann Ghia's a lot lighter."

"Same engine; I might beat you by five miles an hour."

"Doc, do you mind telling me where you studied and practiced?" *Jesus, Jake.* "Sorry, that sounds bad; it doesn't really matter."

"It's okay, Mister Friend. I am a product of the public schools of La Cholla, the University of Mexico, and then UCLA. After my residency, I worked six years in L. A., then four *en el campo* in Central America, and now in La Cholla for almost five years, I believe it is."

"Man, you've really been around. Did you like L.A.? I'm from there."

"Well, to be honest, after my divorce, I couldn't think of one good reason to stay in the area—not to demean your hometown."

"Hardly. I don't go back except to see my family." Jake drove by La

Cholla Gardens. “With your background, you must have come back here on purpose.”

“Yes, a border kid for good, I guess, but I don’t have to sell *chicle* anymore.” He grinned. “Seven years in West Los Angeles left me with enough money to live here for as long as I wish, and with people who both want and need my help.”

Jake nodded at Serna’s office as he drove by. “Too bad Doctor Serna doesn’t share your, uh, enthusiasm.”

“Doctor Serna is young and has many strings attached to him, if I’m using that expression correctly. And he does have all the latest training; I have hopes for him.”

“That’s one way of looking at it, I guess.” *Forget Serna.* “Doc, I want to thank you for giving this a shot, no matter what we run into up here.”

“I’ll do what I can, Mister Friend.”

“Uh, how often have you been in this hospital?”

“The diocese has me over to do free clinics, and a few of my patients end up here. Once in a while, I come over to see them during visiting hours.”

“Without declaring that you’re their doctor?”

“Right, then they go to my clinic after they get out.”

“I see.” He cleared the last summit, the hospital below; Jake accelerated downhill, over the limit.

“Mister Friend, does your wife also teach here?”

“Yes, special ed.”

“Good for her. You both do very important work. It’s obvious that Ben has a lot of respect for you.”

“He’s a great kid; nearly all of my students are great kids.”

“Funny how that works when respect goes both ways,” he said as Jake took the corner to the hospital too fast, braking hard during the turn and missing Castilleja’s last comment.

“Okay, finally,” Jake said, driving right through the lot to the emergency entrance. He parked there, they got out and rushed inside.

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Jake took him to the payphone, making sure the doctor had plenty of change and the hospital's number. While Jake waited, he bit his nails again, noticing it was after one-thirty. He leaned on the wall, glaring at the snack machine he broke the night before.

Castilleja finished his call, and Jake led him quickly down the now familiar hallway past the staff rooms, labs, and the administrator's office to the nursery. María was gone; charge nurse Jaworsky was in the back room, watching over Emma in the incubator. The Flores twins slept in the open incubators out front.

What'll she say about the doc? She's not Monson; she might listen.

Jake knocked on the window; the nurse came out by the twins and saw Doctor Castilleja and his black bag. Her eyes opened wide for a moment; she moved to the back of the nursery to the wall phone to make a brief call, and then walked slowly out into the hall, looking suspiciously at the doctor.

"And who is this, Mister Friend?" Jaworsky looked beyond Jake, down the corridor.

She knows who he is—easy, Jake. "Doctor Castilleja, this is charge nurse Jaworsky." Castilleja smiled, but Jake spoke up before the doctor could express any niceties. "Can you tell me where María is, nurse?"

Jaworsky turned to answer, her round face pouty. "She has a long break between shifts—she spent half of it with your baby. Her niece came for her; María's due back at two."

"Oh. How is Emma doing?"

Jaworsky's tense face seemed to soften; she ruminated over a response, then sighed before she spoke. "Mister Friend, I'm afraid that she is ill after all."

What? "Has something new happened?"

"No, but she should've perked up by now." The nurse looked down the hall again, then at the doctor, who dropped his floppy hat on a chair. "It seems you were right to be concerned."

“María and my wife were right, not me.”

“Well, I’m no longer satisfied with the situation.”

“That’s good. So here’s a real doctor; let’s *do* something—” Jake stopped when one of the hospital’s grey-haired watchmen walked up in tan summer slacks. Jake remembered the askew patch on his sleeve.

“Can I help, Bonnie?” the guard shouted from three feet away.

Great, this guy. Jake faced the nurse.

“Everything’s fine, Wally,” she called back. “Please just stay here until we resolve this.” She glanced at the doctor, who put the black bag down by his hat.

“Yes, ma’am,” Wally yelled, backing off some steps.

“Mister Friend,” Jaworsky said, “I left an urgent message for Doctor Serna. I’ve yet to hear back but expect him to call soon and—”

“Nurse, maybe I can be of some assistance,” the doctor interjected, sounding very courteous. “For now, perhaps you can just update me on the baby’s condition?”

Jake saw Jaworsky’s jaw drop slightly upon hearing the doctor’s near-perfect English. “Um, I’m sorry, I can’t do that.”

Bullcrap. No—easy, Jake. “Listen, nurse, you’ve been one of the most helpful people around here. Can you just update *me*? Then the doctor can listen in.”

She looked away to process the suggestion. “Okay, I don’t see why not.” Jaworsky went back in for the chart.

“Very tactful, Mister Friend.”

“No, it’s true; she’s the best they have.” He paused, sighed, and then shook his head so hard that it shuddered. “This is just so crazy.”

“Take a few deep breaths. For now, this is better than nothing.”

The nurse came out, read the data to Jake and gave a summation of the baby’s condition.

Castilleja read her badge to recall the name. “Very thorough, nurse, uh, Jaworsky. I can’t be sure, of course, but I might have a pretty good idea of what’s going on with her.”

“Oh?” She looked around as if she were violating some cardinal rule. “What do you think it is?” she mumbled.

“The symptoms are very consistent with meconium aspiration.”

Her eyes big again, Jaworsky didn’t ponder very long this time. “That should have been taken care of in the delivery room.”

“Take care of what? What kind of aspiration?” Jake asked both of them.

“Meconium,” Castilleja answered. “The baby might have breathed in her

own feces before she was born.” He turned to Jaworsky. “Nurse, I’m sure you’re aware that there are cases of meconium aspiration which are not apparent right away, even if everything seems normal.”

Jaworsky again allowed the information to sink in before she spoke. “Yes, I know, but I’ve never seen it. So, she might need a trachea tube and suction?”

“Probably. If meconium is the problem, hopefully it’s only in her airways.”

“Or what? How serious is this?” Jake asked, his pitch rising.

“I see this quite a lot, Mister Friend. It is missed most often with babies born at home without a doctor; it can lead to various lung conditions, some very serious.”

“Jesus, let’s *do* something.”

Castilleja turned to the nurse. “As you know, we need X-rays and a blood test to be sure about this.”

“Which neither of us can authorize.”

“Of course. But if the baby has aspirated meconium, time is very important.”

“I *am* expecting Doctor Serna soon.”

“And if it’s hours before he gets here?” Castilleja replied evenly. “Consider this. Perhaps no one would know the difference if I guide you on the suction procedure from the hallway; as you know, it isn’t difficult. If the baby doesn’t have meconium blockage, no harm done.”

The nurse’s brawny shoulders stiffened with incredulity. “I know things are done differently down there, doctor, but you can’t be serious.”

“Yes, he’s serious,” Jake said. “The hospital probably wouldn’t even know it happened.”

“We are small, Mister Friend, but there’s other staff here today besides María. Believe me, they’d know.”

Jake held his palms up in supplication. “Can’t you trust them to support you for doing the right thing?”

Jaworsky scoffed. “Sister Ruth runs this hospital.” She glanced at Wally and lowered her voice. “And she’s *not* Mother Teresa; I’d probably be fired, and then blackballed from working anywhere else.”

“You’re right, nurse; I apologize for my, uh, presumption,” Castilleja said. “I have a suggestion. Perhaps you could begin preparing for the procedure—the room, equipment and the baby—so it can be done as soon as it is authorized?”

She looked at Emma for several seconds. “Yes, okay, I’ll do that, just in case.” She gestured for Wally to come closer, then turned back to Castilleja.

“Nurse,” the doctor said, “I’d keep the oxygen at the highest level Doctor McNally cleared, and someone should be with the baby to monitor her until she’s examined.”

“Wally,” she yelled again, pointing at the nursery entrance, “please stand right there.”

“Oh? Okay,” the old man called back on his way to guard the glass door.

“Nobody goes in except medical staff or María.” She looked at her wristwatch. “And she’s late for the first time ever—what a day.” Jaworsky started around the nursery’s see-through corner. “I’ll be right back,” she shouted to the watchman.

“Yes, ma’am,” Wally said in a normal tone, probably thinking that he was muttering. He pulled a chair over near the door and sat down, smiling meekly at Jake and the doctor, who walked a few feet away together.

“Damn it, we’re not getting anywhere.” Jake looked in at Emma.

“Don’t give up on María, Mister Friend.”

“Yeah, you’re right. How much time do you think we have before Emma could get worse?”

“Without more information, there are too many variables to know anything for sure. She’s what, about thirty-six hours old?” Castilleja frowned at Jake’s nod. “If it *is* meconium, she could be critical by now; it’s also possible there’s just a blockage that could be easily remedied. More likely, it’s something in between.”

“What happens if I just move the old man aside and let you in?”

“In the ten minutes it would take for the police to get here?”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Jake stared toward Emma; his mind felt vacant. “There must be something I can do,” he finally said quietly to the doctor.

“Mister Friend, here’s the nurse already; she’s doing what she can.”

Moving as quickly around the corner as her stout frame could manage, Jaworsky followed the nun-like older nurse, Ruiz, who pushed a dresser-sized stainless steel compartment on wheels into the nursery. Jaworsky stopped at the door when she saw the doctor cross the hall to get a drink from the fountain.

She spoke to Jake, again lowering her voice. “I think your doctor’s right. I’ll deny I ever said this, but you-know-who probably missed this one; I should’ve spotted it sooner. We also just heard that Sister Ruth is coming, though I certainly didn’t call her. Doctor Serna *must* be on his way by now.”

She walked into a flurry of medical implements, towels and plastic tubes; Jake couldn’t see much else from the hallway. Castilleja came back to the glass to watch; Jake told him that Jaworsky agreed with his diagnosis. Ruiz stayed in the back room with the baby.

The charge nurse came out with a paper in hand. "Mister Friend, this is a standard permission form, in case we get that far. I'm not sure it's even required for this, but if it is, Doctor Serna will consult with you." Jaworsky handed him the paper and lowered her double chin to look in the pocket of her white frock. "Darn, lost my pen."

"Got one." Jake removed a retractable ballpoint from his pocket. He knelt and signed the form on the linoleum.

Jaworsky took the paper as Jake stood up. "Okay, Mister Friend, we—" She broke off her sentence when she saw a small group heading her way from emergency. "Now the fun's going to start," she said, and then went back into the nursery.

A tall, slim woman in severe black glasses and a tan dress to her ankles moved briskly down the hall several feet ahead of a tow-headed priest, who was walking with María. They passed by the lanky woman when she stopped to unlock an office door.

Of slight build and only a few inches taller than María, the priest wore dark grey slacks and a short-sleeve black shirt with a classic notched white collar. A three-inch burnished gold crucifix hung to his chest over a forest green sash.

He looked to be in his forties to Jake, who was not encouraged by the small man's sour expression; he hoped the pastor was just cranky from the pink sunburn on his face. Jake took a step toward María, but she moved right behind Wally to enter the nursery.

"*Buenas tardes, Doctor Castilleja,*" the priest said very quietly, his Spanish anglicized.

"Father Paul, good to see you." The doctor sounded polite, as he might to any casual acquaintance.

The priest turned solemnly to Jake. "I assume you are Mister Friend."

"Yes, father." Jake reached out; the small man shook hands indifferently.

"María tells me we have a problem here, Mister Friend." Father Paul's eyes drooped as if he had missed his regular nap.

What's this guy's deal? "Uh, we just want our baby cared for. Obviously, the sooner the better."

"Yes, here comes Sister Ruth; she'll get to the bottom of it," he said, still not showing much concern. The sister carried manila folders under one arm; her eyebrows were pointed down and in like a stereotypical school nun about to punish a miscreant child. She had black hair trimmed into a bowl-like pageboy across her fair forehead. Behind dark rims, the sister's partially rounded blue eyes led Jake to judge her ancestry was both Asian and

European. She seemed more youthful as she came closer, probably about the same age as Father Paul, who had backed up to lean against the wall.

“Good afternoon,” she said with a business-like glance at the doctor before turning to Jake. “I am Sister Ruth Lee. Mister Friend?”

“Yes, sister, I—”

“One moment, please,” she said, sounding to Jake like a telephone operator. She opened a folder and started reading.

Crap. Jake exhaled audibly; the sister shot him a quick sneer. He turned to the glass and saw Ruiz come out of the back room. María said something to the nurse, extending her neck as if pointing down the hall. Jake saw Ruiz check to be sure her supervisors weren’t watching. She grasped María’s arm as you would to a long-time friend; Jake was sure she said, “*Sí, señora.*” Ruiz came out, bowed piously to the pastor and nun, and then hurried around the corner.

Sister Ruth cleared her throat. “So, it is your wish, Mister Friend, not to wait for Doctor Serna and to have Doctor Castilleja attend to your daughter?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

The sister spoke to her open folder. “Doctor, I assume your license remains current in California?”

“It does, sister.”

“This is very irregular; I need to speak with Nurse Jaworsky.” Not waiting for a response, she walked into the nursery and had María take Jaworsky’s place with Emma.

While the charge nurse came out to talk to Sister Ruth, Jake stared at María as she hovered over Emma, massaging each of her limbs, one at a time. *C’mon, Emma, fight it, whatever it is.* He got so close to the glass that the brim of his Cub’s cap bumped the pane.

“She’s something,” Castilleja said from a couple of feet behind.

“Sorry?” Jake replied; he had nearly put the others in the hallway out of his mind.

“María—right now, she’s doing what she can to encourage circulation; very appropriate treatment.” Castilleja changed to a whisper. “Father Paul told me in his gruff way that she pulled him right out of a meeting.”

“I’ll be,” Jake said under his breath. “She had a plan, all right; I wonder if they’ll let you in.”

Castilleja kept a very low voice. “It’s a big step from my free clinics—we’ll see.” He took a business card from his wallet and jotted something on it. “Take this, Mister Friend, in case you need it.” The doctor slipped the little cardboard into Jake’s shirt pocket, but he didn’t read it because Jaworsky was changing places with María again. The sister came out to the hall and walked directly to the priest, still by the wall.

While those two chatted, Jake took out the doctor's card and skimmed it. He looked up to see the sister and father turn in his direction, but she remained silent, deferring to her superior.

"Go ahead, Sister Ruth," the priest said.

"Nurse Jaworsky believes the baby is approaching critical status; my nursing experience leads me to concur. We have decided to allow Doctor Castilleja to examine the child after parental permission is granted and—"

"That's great; thanks," Jake broke in. "Can we please get on with it then?"

"Yes, as soon as you sign forms to hold the hospital legally harmless from Doctor Castilleja's treatment of the baby. Are you willing to do that, Mister Friend?"

"Of course. I have no problems with the hospital." *Except Serna.*

"Very well, then. I need to get those forms from my office." Though she had remained staid, the sister now sounded self-satisfied. "I'll be back right away." She took a few steps, then abruptly stopped when she saw someone enter the far end of the corridor. Sister Ruth turned back to Jake. "Well, I believe this changes everything." She continued on to her office.

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Castilleja, the father, Wally and Jake saw that it was Doctor Serna walking toward them, still in his gaudy Bicentennial shirt, deck shoes, tennis shorts, and Panama hat. The sister avoided him, entering her door and closing it. Serna's ingratiating smile endured until he passed the offices and figured out the identities of those in the entourage outside of the nursery.

Jake watched the young physician's face harden as he came closer. *Too bad they found him.* He saw Jaworsky leave the nursery.

"What's going on?" Jake asked the charge nurse as she moved right past him.

"I have to get some things from the labor room." She hustled her large frame up the hall toward emergency, passing Serna and saying, "Doctor, be right back."

Serna scowled at the preoccupied nurse, then morphed his face into another smile. He half bowed and said, "Father Paul" to the priest, who barely nodded. Serna walked up to Jake, removed the white hat, slapping it on his leg as if it were dusty. "So you did it, Mister Friend; you managed to bully both my staff and our police," he said matter-of-factly, not even acknowledging Castilleja.

Jake pointed right at him. "They think our baby's critical, goddamnit."

Serna took false exception to Jake's oath by wagging a forefinger. "Now, Mister Friend, no need for profanity; right, father?" The doctor turned to the priest.

Father Paul kept his place on the wall, arms folded. "The sister might have a question or two for you, doctor." He watched Sister Ruth leave her office.

Serna turned right back to Jake. "So, *they* think she's critical? Let me reassure you, Mister Friend; that's very unlikely." Acting as if he just became aware of Castilleja's presence, Serna smiled at him. "Doctor, good to see you; I'm sorry somebody wasted your valuable time and brought you

over here. But since they did, please tell me what led you to conclude that the baby is critical.”

Castilleja winced a little. “I haven’t examined the child, doctor, but—”

“Hm, is that so? In that case, maybe everyone can go about their business, so I can go about mine. I’ll change my clothes, Mister Friend, and be right back to re-examine your daughter.”

Not if I can help it. Before Jake decided how to respond, the doctor walked away.

With less decorum than he showed for Father Paul, Serna said, “Sister Ruth,” as she approached. Jaworsky was following her about ten feet behind, lugging a white valise.

“I’ll need to meet with you later, doctor, when this is over,” the nun told Serna.

He gave her a condescending grin. “Whatever you think, sister.” Serna walked on by her. Sister Ruth came up to Jake, no paperwork in hand. Nurse Jaworsky cut between them into the nursery.

“Well, Mister Friend,” the sister said, “things have worked out after all.”

The hell they have.

“Mister Friend?”

Think, Jake. “Yes?”

“Uh, we will be leaving now.” Sister Ruth looked at Castilleja, who picked up his bag and hat. “Thank you, anyway, doctor.” She turned to the priest. “Ready, Father Paul?” The somber pastor didn’t move from the wall.

“Uh-uh,” Jake grumbled. “Hold on.”

The nun faced Jake again. “Sir?”

“I want Castilleja to check the baby.”

“That’s no longer necessary,” she answered gruffly.

“Yes it is.” He saw her stiffen even more.

“No, I’m sorry; we can’t agree to that now.”

“Is that right?” Jake paused. “Well, I called my sister in L.A. this morning. She’s a lawyer; I gave her the whole story, and it’s her professional opinion that Serna has been legally negligent. Second time, now,” he told her, pointing, “I don’t want Serna in charge of our baby, especially since the doctor I *do* want . . .” He pivoted his index finger from the nun to Castilleja, “. . . is standing right there.”

Sister Ruth remained silent for a moment. “That all sounds like a legal threat, Mister Friend. A few minutes ago you were going to sign those forms.”

“Yes, and I’m still willing to sign them as long as Doctor Castilleja is in charge.” Jake couldn’t see Ruiz behind him, stopping a patient in a wheelchair at the intersection of the hallways.

“Do you want your baby cared for—” The sister halted her irate question when she saw Ruiz and the patient. “Or not?” she finished weakly.

Eyebrows furrowed with urgency, Tina pointed from the wheelchair to Castilleja. “We want our baby cared for by *this* doctor.”

Jake turned to her. “Tina.” *My God*. He smiled and walked over; Tina reached out. He put his arm around her terry cloth light blue bathrobe.

“And this is what you think is best for the child, Mrs. Friend?” Sister Ruth asked, stern again.

Tina hugged Jake’s side. “Yes, we agree it’s what’s best for Emma.”

She said Emma’s name. Jake smirked at the nun.

“Mister and Mrs. Friend,” the sister began pompously, “I don’t know how you expect us to condone this when we have our own doctor—”

“Sister,” Jake interrupted, “if we have to, we’ll move Emma in an ambulance with Doctor Castilleja to his clinic; that’s a reality, not a threat. Now *this* is a threat: If we’re forced to do that, my sister will sue both Serna and your hospital when this is over.”

He didn’t wait for a reaction from Sister Ruth, who stood there, bewildered. “Okay, enough fooling around,” Jake said, letting go of Tina. “Doctor, please go in and examine our daughter.” Castilleja took tentative steps toward the nursery as Jake removed the card from his pocket, flicking it with a finger. “I’m going to the payphone to call the *Mexican* ambulance.” He sounded ironic and sarcastic at once.

Jake faced Castilleja, who had stopped to wait for a reaction from the father or sister. “Doctor, can the ambulance get across the border all right?”

“With a call from the hospital.” Castilleja moved closer to Wally, who stood up and looked to the sister for guidance.

Jake spoke to the priest. “Father, will you help us with that call?”

“No, Mister Friend, it won’t be necessary.” Father Paul turned calmly to Castilleja. “Go ahead, doctor, do whatever you can for the child.”

“We need chest X-rays right away, and a blood test,” Castilleja said as Wally pulled the door open willingly.

“Arrange for that immediately, sister,” the priest said.

“But father—”

“Now, please, sister; then you can go get those liability papers.”

The doctor was already at the nursery sink, washing his hands. Ruiz and the sister entered; the nun told María to switch with Jaworsky again. Castilleja went in the back room with Ruiz and had everyone don a surgical mask.

Jake rolled Tina to the window, explaining what he could about meconium aspiration. “. . . and there could be lung problems, Tina. That’s about all I know so far.”

"It sounds awful."

"Castilleja said he deals with it a lot. He's on top of it; he'll explain more when there's time."

Tina had to stretch her neck to see the doctor examining Emma with his stethoscope. While the sister and the charge nurse spoke near the sink, Ruiz and María followed instructions from Castilleja.

"Finally," Tina said toward the glass. "At least Emma has a fighting chance now."

"Damn right she does." Jake put his arm around her again. "That's the second time you said it."

"What?"

"Emma's name."

"Oh," she mumbled, still watching the doctor.

Jake released her and walked across the hall to the priest. "Father Paul, thank you very much."

The pastor made a slight bow to Jake, then watched Serna walk quickly down the hallway, now in scrubs over a shirt, tie and suit pants, as if he had no intention of staying for long. His black wingtips ticked on the linoleum.

Get lost, doctor. Jake joined the old watchman in front of the nursery door.

Serna came up to them and spotted Castilleja inside. "What's going on here?" He glowered right in Wally's face.

"I believe you're not needed right now, doctor," Wally shouted.

Jake felt the adrenaline warming his face and skull. "In other words, stay the hell out."

The doctor scoffed aloud at Jake. "Guard, please do your job; have Mister Friend move."

Wally cupped one ear. "What's that, doctor?"

"Get this man out of my way," Serna shouted back, not keeping all the anger out of his voice.

"Oh. Sorry, doctor, the hospital would need cops for that." Wally pointed to the hallway. "Here's Jesse, anyway." Jesús had come in and walked most of the way down to the nursery.

"About time, sergeant," Serna said to him. "Please clear this doorway so I can get to my patient."

Jesús nodded to the priest, then the others; he looked in the nursery. "I don't think so, doc." He stood near Wally and Jake. "The sister's in there; I'd say it's up to her and the father to tell me what to do."

Serna snapped his head around to the priest. "Father, what's the meaning of all this?"

The priest turned slowly to Serna. "We are honoring the parents' request to have Doctor Castilleja examine the baby."

His calm veneer gone, a vein bulged in the doctor's forehead. "She's *my* patient. This is outrageous and probably illegal," he said to Father Paul, trying to contain his ire.

"Doctor, feel free to complain about our decision to the diocese."

The sister had come out of the nursery in time to hear the end of the exchange between Serna and the priest. "I suggest that you calm down, Doctor Serna."

"Maybe when someone listens to me," he fumed. "There's no medical reason for this intervention. I have been monitoring the baby's progress all along."

"Doctor, it seems at least one of those points is questionable. If Doctor Castilleja's preliminary diagnosis is correct, I suggest we *all* pray for the baby's illness not to be severe." She nodded toward the nursery.

Serna scoffed again, not as vociferously. "So what is this diagnosis?"

"We're waiting for him to finish the examination and view the test results and X-rays, but he believes it is meconium aspiration."

"What?" As soon as he said that, the doctor turned pensive. Moments later, his mouth and eyes opened briefly like a witness to a sudden auto accident. Serna heaved an anguished sigh.

"Perhaps you should be praying too, doctor," the priest said softly.

Serna was introspective again, seeming to mull over everything at once. "Christ almighty," he finally muttered, then peeked guiltily at the priest. Serna lifted a hand and gripped his forehead for several moments. "Sister," he said, his voice feeble, "since you're covered here for now, I guess I'll be at home."

"I would appreciate it if you would stay. Doctor Castilleja wants to confer with you as soon as he comes out."

Serna looked at her solemnly. "Oh."

"If it's all right with the Friends."

He looks pathetic; too damn bad. Jake had already moved over by Tina. He touched her arm. "What do you think?"

"If that's what Doctor Castilleja wants," Tina said distractedly, now on her feet and staring into the back room.

"I guess you're right." Jake turned. "Okay, sister, whatever *our* doctor wants." He scowled at Serna.

"Good." Sister Ruth faced the doctor. "All this will likely save you some trips, Doctor Serna. We'll probably have some fireworks accidents this afternoon."

Serna walked slowly away. "I'll be at my desk," he uttered, his head halfway down as if listening to the clicks of his metal taps on the polished floor.

The sister dismissed Wally and headed back for her office.

Jesús came over to the Friends. "I have to take off; be sure to call me if you need anything."

Jake held the sergeant's shoulder. "We appreciate all you've done."

"My pleasure."

Tina turned away from the nursery and sat in the wheelchair again. "Yes, thank you, Jesús."

"Sure. Oh, Ana will probably drop by in the morning, if it's okay."

"That'll be fine." Tina sounded less than enthused.

"Jesús, do you know if Fiera has been in any trouble?" Jake asked.

"She got out once." He held back a grin. "Showed up with a dolly, all chewed up. Don't worry; she's fine—entertaining everyone." Jesús turned more serious. "Okay, I'm off; good luck with everything."

"Thanks again." Jake turned back to Tina. They watched Doctor Castilleja tapping on Emma's chest with a forefinger. The sister brought the forms right back from her office; they signed them, and she left again.

María came out to the hall and pulled a chair over to Jake. "*Señor Fren, you need to sit, too. I am afraid it is going to be a long time.*"

Tina got up from the wheelchair and embraced her; Jake put a hand on María's shoulder. He saw Tina just staring past the tiny woman into the nursery; it was Jake who had to hold back the tears.

Father Paul came over; the Friends sat down, and Tina said, "Father, thank you for what you did."

"I think we've done what we can on a secular level." He kissed his green sash; María went to him, and they prayed together.



Over the next hour, Tina and Jake waited and watched as the doctor was assisted by most of the hospital's current shift, including three nurses, María, and a technician with a rolling X-ray machine that barely fit through the doors. As Sister Ruth predicted, Doctor Serna was summoned on the P.A. system to the emergency room. The father of the twins visited his children and chatted a while in Spanish with the Friends and Father Paul. The man left, saying his whole family would pray for the baby.

Minutes after the technician finally returned with a large X-ray envelope, Ruiz came out to the hall with a mask still on her face; she hurried toward

emergency, carrying the X-rays. Jake and Tina turned to Father Paul.

The priest spoke in his usual subdued tone. "I'll see what's going on." He started up the hallway.

"Thank you, father," Tina and Jake said almost simultaneously. They waited again, watching María go back and forth three times between the twins and the back room. On María's third trip out, Castilleja followed her to the nursery in his blue scrubs. He removed the mask and gloves, then walked quickly toward the hall.

Jake pushed Tina's wheelchair over to the nursery door to meet the doctor. To Jake, Castilleja's dark eyes seemed ambivalent, a conscious effort to be professionally neutral about the baby. *Jesus, what's he thinking?*

"Mrs. Friend, we haven't actually met." He briefly took her hand.

Tina spoke solemnly. "Thank you for being here, doctor."

"Of course." He paused, then looked at both of them. "Unfortunately, my preliminary diagnosis was correct. I removed meconium from her airways with suction, but some matter was already deeply aspirated; we don't know how much. On the X-rays, the lungs show streaks and marks where the lining is damaged, one cause of her labored breathing. She's also running a fever now, which we're treating, of course. For being in such serious condition, she is relatively stable; we will know in a few days if we caught this in time."

Overwhelmed by the information, the Friends didn't respond right away. Jake moved around the chair and took Tina's hand; the doctor turned to see Serna, Father Paul, and Ruiz just starting down the hallway.

"Could she die from this, doctor?" Jake finally asked.

Now with a frown he couldn't hide, Castilleja faced Tina and Jake. "Serious complications with the lungs are possible, including pneumonia. Her late delivery may have had something to do with the aspiration, but it's helpful that she's a big girl with developed lungs. Most likely, she will either improve or decline very gradually while we treat and stabilize her for a couple days before a transfer to the university, unless the pediatrician recommends that she come immediately. Hopefully, there won't be any sudden or severe complications with her breathing."

Hopefully? Good God. Jake let go of Tina, chewing one of his nails again.

"So what is included in the treatment, doctor?" Tina asked, just above a whisper.

"Doctor Serna and I still need to consult with the pediatrician." Castilleja paused; he saw that Serna and the others were more than halfway there. "Actually, I would like Doctor Serna to give you the specifics on our treatment up to now."

"What do you mean?" Jake's face reddened with his question.

Tina clutched Jake's upper arm, pulling on him a little. "What's your reasoning, doctor?"

"I won't be able to do the follow-up on your daughter, Mrs. Friend. I'll be needed at home soon, and you need someone right here to expedite her treatment and the consultations with the university."

Just a minute. "What about Doctor McNally?"

"I don't think you will want to wait for him. I suggest you give Doctor Serna another chance, Mister Friend."

Tina squeezed Jake's wrist, looking right at him. "We need him for now, Jake." Her tone was quiet but firm.

Goddamnit. He clenched his teeth. "Jesus," Jake said, just before Serna, the priest and nurse Ruiz came within earshot. *You bastard,* he wanted to say to Serna, but Jake just glared at him.

The young doctor looked like a mourner, his face pallid and drawn, no sign of his recent anger. Holding the X-rays, he lowered his head to avoid eye contact with anyone before he entered the nursery with Ruiz and Castilleja. The priest walked over to the Friends.

"I'm still not comfortable with this, father." Jake's eyes were daggered toward where the physicians and Ruiz stopped to wash up and put on masks and gloves.

"Mister Friend, I believe you and your wife have done everything you can."

"I guess." He moved Tina up to the glass.

"Well, I'm going now," the priest said. "I'll be back tomorrow to check up on things."

Tina turned to him, her face bleak. "Father, if we need to, can we get in touch with you?"

"The sister will be here for a while, and María knows how to find me at Saint Teresa's—boy, does she ever," he added with just a crease of a grin.

"Uh, thanks again, father," Jake said, glaring into the nursery.

Father Paul raised his open right hand in an informal blessing and walked away.

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As Father Paul left, Tina glanced up at Jake, who was still glowering at the hubbub on the other side of the glass. The Friends silently watched the doctors and nurses in the back room, their surgical masks puffing when they spoke. Serna, now wearing glasses, moved his stethoscope over Emma's chest. Tired of stretching her neck to see, Tina stood up by Jake.

They watched for another ten minutes or so, hardly speaking except for occasional guesses about what was going on. Doctor Serna came out to the nursery; Castilleja remained with the baby. His mien serious, Serna removed the gloves and mask and made a phone call at the back wall. Tina sat in the wheelchair again, Jake standing by her.

The doctor finished the call, walked into the hallway with a chart, and came over to them, reading. Jake and Tina only saw Serna's mussed black hair until he looked up from his clipboard. Eyes bloodshot and anxious through black rims, the doctor's shoulders slouched under his rumpled blue scrubs.

Serna's demeanor didn't jibe with Jake's image of him as the cocky young doctor of backwater medicine . . . *and damned if he isn't a lot older than I am.*

Glasses in hand, Serna pinched the bridge of his nose hard; it left a white mark in his skin for seconds. "Lost my contacts—not used to these." He sighed. "Mister and Mrs. Friend, I owe you an apology—"

"I don't want to hear it," Jake interrupted, "just give us the rest of the information."

"All right." Serna lifted his glasses and retreated to the clipboard. "You already know, as Doctor Castilleja suspected, that your daughter aspirated meconium." He stopped, glancing up at Jake.

Worried, doctor? "Go on, with something we *don't* know."

Serna held the paper closer. "After he removed some matter from her airways, she began breathing a little easier, though the rate is still rapid. Unfortunately, she aspirated meconium into her lungs before birth, we now

believe. The patches on the chest X-ray indicate chronic lung disease, which is causing respiratory distress.”

“I think we’ve heard all of that, too,” Jake scolded.

“I wanted to be sure.” Serna glimpsed over his rims before directing his eyes back to the clipboard. “Okay, her treatment: We often see lung problems with premature babies, not late-terms like your daughter, but our approach will be similar. As you know, the fever indicates infection; we don’t know how widespread. Her temperature is holding for now at about a hundred and two; we’ve started antibiotics. We are also administering a drug that should eventually give some relief to the lung damage and improve her breathing. She’s still receiving monitored oxygen therapy, but we’re changing now to a ventilator. We also hope, of course, these measures will help to prevent pneumonia.”

“And how likely is pneumonia?” Jake asked.

“It’s possible; we can’t put a number on it.” Serna removed the glasses and tortured the top of his nose again. “We’re very thankful Doctor McNally started some oxygen last night. It gave her a head start.”

“Yeah, we’re thankful, too.” Jake narrowed his eyes almost to a squint. “And I bet your lawyer’s thankful.”

Serna took in a full breath as if his own doctor had just advised him to do so. “I know you’re upset with me, Mister Friend, but it’s for your baby’s sake I’m glad Doctor McNally took the precaution.”

Bull. “Just go on.”

“Certainly.” He looked blandly at his information. “I just called for a consult with a pediatric specialist at the university, Doctor Lowell; we will be speaking to her within the hour.” He straightened his neck while staring inside toward the back room. “I think she’ll agree that we should continue trying to stabilize the breathing and fever, and to increase nutritional intake before she can be moved.” He turned back to them. “She’s being fed intravenously.”

Tina cleared her throat. “Doctor, what if she does get worse?”

“Depending on the symptoms, Mrs. Friend, we’d likely have to go ahead and move her.” He paused. “I do hope you understand there were no clear indicators of meconium aspiration when she was born.”

“That’s great, doctor.” Jake’s nostrils flared. “There were plenty of *indicators* before she was a day old.”

“Yes,” Serna said, long-faced, “which is why I was trying to apologize.”

Tina spoke softly to Jake. “I need to talk to you.”

“Right now?”

“Please.”

Serna took a few steps, putting his hand on the door to the nursery and looking back at Jake. "I'll check back with you in a few minutes."

"Your track record doesn't give me reason to believe that," Jake said. "I'd like to speak to Doctor Castilleja when he has a chance."

"I'll tell him." Serna went back in the nursery, his posture still slumped.

"Something wrong?" Jake asked Tina abruptly.

She looked up at him. "No, but I think Serna is sorry for how he handled everything."

"Well, I don't."

"I know, Jake, but you're not just mad, you're furious." She stood to take his arm, but he moved away.

Jake looked inside at the doctors. "Damn right I'm furious; you're not exactly a barrel of laughs yourself." He exhaled deeply. *For God's sake, Jake.*

Tina sat back down in the wheelchair. "You're right; I haven't been much help."

He turned to her, shaking his head. "Tina, I'm sorry I said that. You *did* help; you came down here with Ruiz and confronted them. That was hard for you."

"Not this time." She stood again, sliding in her soft slippers on the slick linoleum over to Jake. Tina took his hand and they stared inside at the increasing array of tubes, lines, and monitors around their child.

"María was right about you, too," Tina finally said.

"How's that?"

"She told me how you've been trying so hard to handle things. She didn't say it, but she meant that I was acting like you didn't care. I'm so sorry, Jake."

"Forget it; I'm not the one who gave birth to an eight-pound baby."

"Let's just keep concentrating on what's best for her, like you've been doing. That's all I meant about your anger with Serna; I don't excuse what he did, but we do need him."

"Yeah, I'll bite my lip when he's around, but I'm keeping an eye on him."

Tina squeezed his arm. "Thanks, Don Joaquín."

He smiled briefly, patting her hand. "It's helpless time again. I wish there was something we could do."

"Like the father said, we're doing what we can."

Hand in hand, they sat down at the window again and watched. María came out after a few minutes and shared some information, though it was mostly old news. They thanked her for what seemed like the fiftieth time, encouraging her to continue the updates.

Over the next half hour, the nurses drifted away, Castilleja stayed with Emma while Serna came out with María to check up on the twins. Jake heard

Ruiz announce on the P.A. system for Serna to take a call. He spoke on the nursery phone for at least ten minutes, then went in to confer with Castilleja before the older doctor walked out to Jake and Tina in the hall.

"Mister and Mrs. Friend," Castilleja said, "the fever is the same; her breathing rate has increased slightly, not enough to say she's getting worse. We just heard from the pediatrician; she concurs with our treatment and agrees we need to stabilize your daughter before we consider moving her. I'm afraid that's all I have for now."

"Doctor," Tina said before Jake could speak up, "can we see Emma?"

"Of course. We're pretty much down to monitoring."

Good, she really needs this. "Uh, Tina can go in alone; it'll be less hassle in there. I'll see Emma later." *When Serna's gone.*

"Okay, you'll need to scrub, Mrs. Friend." He looked at Jake. "Doctor Serna said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes, uh, I had a couple of questions. You covered one of them; I forgot the other one. Oh, how long do you think you can hang in here with us?"

"Things are calm at home so far. I'll try to be here at least until the Bicentennial fireworks; wouldn't want to miss that." A sardonic grin broke below Castilleja's moustache; then he was serious again. "After I go, Mister Friend, you're going to have to trust Doctor Serna."

Jake sneered, glancing up at the wall clock. "Six fifteen; I have a few hours to get used to that idea."

"Yes." Castilleja turned to Tina. "María will come out for you, Mrs. Friend." Tina nodded back.

"Doctor," Jake said, "I might go to the lobby for a cat nap. You'll know where to find me if I'm not here."

"Good idea. And Mrs. Friend, I suggest you go to your room for some rest after you see the baby." Castilleja smiled. "No charge for all that good medical advice."

Jake raised his brows. "That reminds me, doctor, we want to pay you at U.S. rates for all your time."

"Considering the work that you and Mrs. Friend do, I won't take a *peso*. Believe me, it's my honor." He walked back into the nursery.

"He's quite a guy," Jake said to Tina. "We're lucky to have him."

"Yes, we are."

María came out and took her in to get ready. When Tina walked by the Flores twins, she didn't look at them—intentionally, Jake thought. After she was ready with the gown, mask and gloves, Tina turned to Jake, her eyes heavy as if she had been weeping, though he hadn't seen her cry for days. She

made a passing wave to him with a gloved hand before María escorted her into the back room.

He watched Tina peer into the incubator for a minute or so. Jake felt certain that she longed to smile at Emma, but he could tell by the top half of her face that Tina remained somber. *Jesus, I can't take any more of this.* He got up, knuckling a tear out of the corner of one eye.

Jake walked down the hall to the vending machines, put a quarter in for another peanut-caramel bar, sat on the bench and ate it, deciding against going to the lobby. He stood and saw a blur of lights from the in-out board as he walked out. *Damn thing meant so much a day ago.*

He made his way back to the nursery, glanced at Tina, sat down and propped his feet up, pulling the brim of his cap down over his eyes. Counting backwards from five hundred, Jake consciously breathed in and out sixteen times before he lost his place.



Jake was startled awake by another call on the P.A. for Doctor Serna, who hurried out of the nursery and down the hall. It was just after seven o'clock; María rocked one of the twins, and Castilleja was on the phone. Tina was gone, and Monson had replaced Jaworsky; he stood by Emma's incubator, watching her.

Damn, I thought Jaworsky was on until midnight. Stay away from this schmuck or you'll get pissed again. He forced a smile for María as she brought the Flores baby back to an open incubator by the window. The other twin was awake; María changed his diaper, then put him back near his sleeping brother. Jake watched the alert baby boy seem to check out everything above. *When will Emma do that?*

He saw Doctor Serna come down the hall as quickly as he left, and then go right back in with Castilleja. *Now what?* María came to the door; Jake again pulled it open for her. *“¿Is there some problem, señora?”*

“Señor Fren, you need to talk to the doctors. The breathing is not worse, but they say her heart is slower.”

“¿That is something good, no?”

She frowned. *“I only know that breathing and the heart are not always together. I am sorry, but the doctors are worried. They want the X-rays again.”*

What? “¿Señora, is my wife in her room?”

“Sí, she told us not to wake you.”

"*I will return in a moment.*" Jake rushed around the corner almost into a tall cart with a few messy dinner trays. He skirted around it and ran down the hall. He found Tina sitting in the visitor's chair in a white hospital gown; she was asleep with the crocheting in her lap. *Don't bother her yet.*

By the time Jake visited the bathroom and then jogged back to the nursery, Emma's incubator and Ruiz were both gone. Serna was speaking seriously to Monson near the twins while Castilleja and María were in back, moving some equipment. *Jesus, what's going on?* Serna finished with Monson and came out to Jake with a form in his hand. "Where's Emma, doctor?"

"To save time, we had nurse Ruiz wheel her down to X-ray. Mister Friend, the baby's symptoms have changed—both her heart rate and blood pressure have dropped, and there's some cyanosis—uh, her skin color isn't good. All this is indicative of a collapsed lung; we're doing another X-ray to be sure."

"My God, how serious is that?"

"She's definitely in distress, but we're preparing a procedure to help her."

"What procedure?"

"We have to insert a tube between the ribs to remove the air from her chest cavity and allow the lung to gradually re-expand."

"Right through her skin?"

"It sounds worse than it is; this procedure is safe and usually successful."

"Usually? What if it isn't?"

"It's not likely, but we would have to move her right away to the university, perhaps by helicopter."

"Jesus."

"Do you want to speak to Doctor Castilleja?"

"No, do I need to sign that?" Jake pointed at the form in the doctor's hand.

"Both of you, preferably. The X-ray should be here in ten or fifteen minutes." He gave Jake the paper.

"Okay, I'll take this to her." He ran down to the room and found Tina still dozing in the chair. *Damn, you have to wake her.* He signed the form, but made himself wait, actually timing a couple of minutes on the wall clock while chewing his nails and hoping Tina would stir. He walked over, kissed her gently on the cheek and said, "Latina?"

Her eyes fluttered. "Hi, amor." Tina showed a hint of a smile, more than he'd seen in days.

"Hey, cutie. Sorry to wake you."

"It's okay. I just dropped off; I think it relaxed me some to see Emma."

Damn. "I have a little bad news—sorry."

Tina blinked, then focused on him with an intrepid stare. She listened to

his explanation of Emma's lung problems, then said, "She's made it this far; give me your pen, please."

Tina signed; Jake told her he'd come back when they began. He returned to the nursery, where Ruiz was pushing the closed incubator into the back room; Monson, Serna and Castilleja were all in there, preparing. María, wearing gloves and a surgical mask, came out to check the sleeping twins. She saw Jake and started toward the hall, lowering her mask. He walked over to meet her.

"¿What can you tell me, señora?" Jake let go of the door as she came out.

"They are still waiting for the X-rays, Señor Fren. To be truthful, la niña, well, she needs the help of both God and the doctors. I am praying for her when I can." María briefly closed her eyes and crossed herself. "I am sorry to be so grave." She looked inside at the physicians. "¿Do you pray, Señor Fren?"

"No, señora."

She looked at him again. "Su señora, I think she prays for both of you."

"Sí, that is probably true."

"I will pray with her when I can."

"Uh, I am sure she would like that."

They turned toward Emma; Jake saw Castilleja checking her with his stethoscope, Monson just standing there.

María might know why he's here. He raised his brows toward the back room. "Señora, I thought you didn't work the same hours as Monson."

"It is a holiday schedule. He hates me even more now, but he is quiet. I think he is worried about his job—Doctor Serna scolded him."

He did? "¿Por qué?"

"They think I did not understand, but he told Monson that he deserves part of the blame for your baby. I had to go find the sister to stop the argument."

"Really?" he said in English.

"Um, sí, señor."

"¿Is the sister still here?"

"No, but she arranged for the baby to go to the university when the doctors say so."

"Muy bien, señora; it helps us a lot to know that."

María turned her head when she heard footfalls in the other corridor.

"The X-rays are here, señor."

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The technician rushed the X-rays inside and left after a couple of minutes. The two physicians came out to the nursery together; Castilleja said something quietly to María, who was with the twins again. Monson sneered at her from the back room as both doctors walked out to Jake.

“Mister Friend, we’re certain now that she has a collapsed lung,” Castilleja said. “We need to start right away on the procedure.”

Good God. Jake handed him the signed form. “Is there anything to worry about with the procedure itself?”

Serna took the question. “No, not at all. It should take us only about ten minutes. If she responds well, then we can transfer her in a couple days.”

Jake turned to Castilleja. “How will you know?”

“We want her color, heart rate, and blood pressure to normalize.”

“And the breathing?” Jake saw Castilleja wait to let Serna speak, but he didn’t.

“That will probably take longer,” the older doctor answered, “but we hope it will start to improve.”

“And if all that doesn’t happen?”

“There are emergency procedures that can be done at the university,” Castilleja said. “I don’t think it serves any purpose to describe them now.” He sounded slightly miffed. “We should get started.”

“Of course, go ahead. I’m going to get Tina.”

Jake hurried down the hall again to her room; she was still sitting in the chair in her gown. She looked up from the crocheting.

“It’s a collapsed lung for sure, Tina. They’re starting; it’ll only take about ten minutes; I can tell you more in the hall.”

“You go. Just come for me when it’s finished; you can tell me everything then.”

“You sure?”

“It won’t help anything if I rush down there; I need to go to the bathroom anyway.”

“Okay, see you in a little while.” He went directly to the nursery, then waited and watched, though he could only see the backs of Serna, Castilleja, and Monson.

Doctor Serna finally came out to Jake, attempting a reassuring smile before he spoke. “The procedure went fine, Mister Friend.”

“Do you know anything yet?”

“Just that air is draining from her chest. Now the waiting is on again.”

“We’ll need to be updated on everything when I bring Tina back.”

“Of course. Is there anything else we can do now for you and your wife?”

Guilt trip—use it. “As a matter of fact, there is. Can you arrange to move Monson back to the nurses’ station and leave nurse Ruiz in there?”

Serna nodded. “Yes, I can do that.”

“You don’t want to know why?”

“That won’t be necessary.” Serna went right back in to calmly but literally tell Monson where to go. The male nurse walked out and scowled at María; he went into the hall, ignored Jake, and stomped around the corner. María looked out at Jake with that crooked grin he had only seen two or three times. She then frowned and rapidly made the sign of the cross, apparently castigating herself for gloating.

Easy on yourself, María; he deserves it. On the way back to Tina, Jake met Ruiz in the hall; they smiled in passing.

He came to Monson, who stiffly pretended to be looking at some papers on the counter. Jake walked by and said, “Now you have time to find a dog for the next race.”

Tina was sitting on the edge of the bed in her robe and slippers when Jake walked in.

“They’re finished, Tina—so far, so good.” He sat on the bed, put an arm around her, and filled her in on what Serna said about the air draining. “They’ll give us the latest when we get there, then we just wait some more.”

“Okay. I only need a minute.”

“I’ll go get your wheelchair from the hall.”

“At least let me walk out to it.” Tina got up and shuffled to the sink. She washed her hands and gave her long hair a few brush strokes before banding it quickly into a ponytail. Jake took Tina’s hand, led her out to the wheelchair, and then rolled her down the hall past Monson. They looked in the nursery; Serna was on the phone.

Jake checked the back room. "Just Ruiz and María—I don't see Castilleja." He stood behind the wheelchair again.

"Maybe he finally took a break." Tina watched Serna finish the call, then come right out to her. "How's Emma, Doctor?"

"Not noticeably worse, Mrs. Friend, which is the minimum of what we expect at this point. We hope the heart rate and blood pressure will gradually improve over the next few hours; that would mean the lung is re-inflating. After that, she will probably have the tube in there for at least two days. Then we hope to move her when she's more stable." Serna paused. "Questions?"

"Yes. Where's the doctor?" Jake asked bluntly.

"He just left in a taxi; he was called to his clinic for an emergency. He said to tell you he'll be back to visit when he can. I'll be consulting with him on the phone." Serna looked in the nursery, then turned back. "Are you and I going to be okay here, Mister Friend?"

"It's not like I have much choice."

"No, I guess not."

The two men exchanged self-conscious glances. Serna sighed before speaking to Tina. "Mrs. Friend, do you want to wait someplace more comfortable?"

"I don't know." She turned to Jake.

"Uh, we'll let María know if we decide to wait somewhere else," Jake said to Serna.

"Sure, that's fine." The doctor went back into the nursery.

"Jake, I feel like a vulture sitting here, but my room is too removed from everything."

"The lobby's actually closer."

"Okay, let's go out there."

María had returned to the twins; Jake raised a forefinger to ask for a minute of her time. She stopped bundling up one of the babies and met Jake outside the door.

"*¿Señor Fren, he told you la niña is not worse, no?*"

"*Sí, gracias. ¿How are your twins doing?*"

"*Bien.*" They walked toward Tina. "*Señora Flores is ready to nurse. She will not allow Monson to bring the boys.*" She shrugged her small but sturdy shoulders as they came to Tina. "*I said nothing to Señora Flores.*"

Jake snickered without smiling. "*Señora, we just want to let you know that we will be waiting in the lobby.*"

"Oh," María said, giving Tina's hand a soft pat. "*I will tell the doctor and nurse Ruiz.*"

Jake managed a smile. "*Gracias, señora. I am going to come by here every half hour or so.*"

“Está bien, Señor Fren.”

Holding a mask to her face, María went all the way into the doctor to give him the message. She came back out to her two small charges; Tina and Jake waved to her before he pushed the wheelchair away.

“Jake, I forgot the afghan and my purse; your things are in there, too.”

He left her at the corner and walked quickly down the hall, ignoring Monson. Jake hustled back to Tina a couple of minutes later, the big purse and the afghan filling his arms. He put it all on her lap, noticing how the red, green, and yellow Cameroon colors clashed with the pile of red, white, and blue that Tina could barely keep from falling to the floor. He rolled her toward the lobby, passing the four rooms at that end of the ward; they were still spic-and-span, and vacant.

A young couple and an elderly woman sat in the lobby near the door to the other wing. Wally, alone at the counter, asked the Friends about the baby; they yell-chatted with him for a minute or so. Jake noticed it was almost eight-thirty and there was still some light outside. They settled off by themselves on the sofa nearest their hallway and began waiting yet again.

Two feet or so away from Jake, Tina worked so diligently on the afghan that her singular activity began to irritate him a little. He just stared at the same page in his book, getting up after twenty minutes to mosey down past the nursery, making sure María, Serna, or Ruiz could spot him if they needed to. On his second trip, nurse Ruiz smiled at him again, which annoyed Jake because he thought it was false optimism. After Jake’s fourth sojourn, he came back and sat by Tina and began gnawing at a thumbnail.

“When did you start biting your nails?”

He dropped his hand as if it didn’t belong to him. “Damn—recently.”

“Are you okay?”

“Just nervous.” He saw that Tina was tying off and snipping around the red border of the afghan.

Tina looked up. “Anything different down there?”

“No, Ruiz is around most of the time, and María’s still back and forth between the two rooms. She gets off soon—what a long day for her. She said she’ll come by to see you before she leaves.”

Tina pursed her lips slightly. “Bless her heart.”

“Yeah. I saw Serna go to his office; I’ll talk to him on my next trip.” Jake saw that it was dark outside; he checked the wall clock. “It’s been over an hour and a half now.” He watched her trim the yarn for several moments. “I don’t know how you can do that; I can’t read one lousy page.”

“It doesn’t take much concentration.” She put the scissors on her lap and looked at him. “Jake, I was wondering about something.”

"What is it?"

"Why did they believe you before when you said we'd sue them?"

"Oh, that. Before you came, I lied that I had just called Hannah. I told them that she said Serna was negligent, which was true; except she said it last night."

"I see. So your sisters don't know everything that's going on?"

"Hannah just knows about the breathing problems, not the procedure. She called Caroline and Joyce; they think everything's fine."

"You didn't call my family, right?" Tina was staring down at her lap.

"No, I didn't call anyone."

"I want to keep it like that until we know more." She stood, leaving the scissors on the sofa.

"Yeah, except Hannah; she's apt to fly over here." He checked the clock again. "I should call her, but it can wait."

"Jake?"

He turned to her. "Yes?"

Tina was holding up the afghan like hanging out a sheet on a clothesline; it drooped down to the floor and spread a few feet away. "It's finished."

"It's huge. Looks, uh, very patriotic."

"It looks pretty silly to me."

"María suggested the colors. She'll love it."

"But what should I do now?" Tina held up the project again, then tears flowed over her cheeks.

"Jesus, Tina." He took the afghan, pulled up the rest from the floor, and tossed it all on the sofa. Jake put his arms around her as they sat down.

"I'm sorry—so sorry." She began to weep.

"For what? There's nothing to be sorry for."

"I—I—just am," she answered around heaving sobs.

"It's okay; just let it out. You've been holding it in for days."

"I—didn't—know—what—to—say." She struggled to breathe between words.

"To who?"

"You—everybody."

"It's okay, Latina." He held her a minute or two until the crying diminished some and she pushed lightly on his chest. He backed off a bit, caressing her face with one hand.

Tina inhaled a long sniff, sat up, and began gathering all the red, white, and blue material. "I'll be all right."

"Yeah, you will." He watched her begin to fold the afghan. "You could make the border wider, and add some fringe, couldn't you?"

“I suppose so; María brought plenty of yarn.” She faced the hallway. “Jake, my God, here he comes.” Tina put down the afghan on her other side; Jake held her with one arm as Serna walked up to the sofa.

“Are you all right, Mrs. Friend?”

She had taken a tissue from her purse and was dabbing her eyes. “Yes, doctor, I’m fine. How’s Emma?”

Though he was trying to be professional, Serna couldn’t hold back a slight smile. “The breathing is the same, but her heart rate and blood pressure are a little better, enough to be reasonably sure that the lung is beginning to re-inflate. I hope this is the start of a turnaround for your baby.”

“Thank you,” Jake said, holding Tina as she wept quietly to the good news.

“You’re welcome.” Serna looked up. He, Wally, and four other people in the lobby *oohed* and *aahed* with delight at a red pyrotechnic bloom that lit up the plate glass panes of the hospital’s A-frame façade.

Jake and Tina, still embracing, didn’t turn around to watch a single burst from the ten-minute Bicentennial display.

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Three days later, the baby's heart rate and blood pressure had stabilized enough that they went ahead with the transfer to the university. The day before, Jake took Tina back to the house in Sofia.

After they moved Emma, Jake stayed at the university's pediatric intensive care facility for hours, until he was satisfied that he understood everything and the baby was settled in. On his way back to Sofia in the late afternoon, he encountered an intense downpour; it obliterated his visibility, and Jake had to turn off to wait it out. He found a solid gravel road, drove in about twenty yards, and stopped Loretta by a wash.

It was a welcome respite from the stress of the previous week; he swiveled both wind wings open a crack, sat back, and watched the thunderstorm pass, waiting longer than he had to. Jake rolled down the windows, inhaled the cool, fresh air, and listened to what was now just a steady drizzle tapping softly in the standing water.

He got out and walked by dripping palo verde and mesquite over to the wash, which was about a hundred feet wide but only had a few large puddles. Jake watched, waited, and was about to leave when a three-foot swell of dun rainwater roiled down the arroyo. He waited for something interesting to float by, but saw nothing more than bobbing branches before he left.

Jake pulled into the driveway in Sofia, passed the restaurant, and drove slowly through the desert undergrowth to the rental. He was glad to see that a storm, maybe the same one, had hit there and thoroughly watered their yard and garden. After Jake parked, he walked around some mud and noticed that it was still relatively cool outside.

He went in and found Tina resting on their bed, lying toward the wall in her robe. The afghan was folded and stacked on the dresser; she had left scissors, a crochet hook, and a skein of red yarn on top of it.

"Hi, amor," Tina said. "Look what you've done." She turned toward him,

revealing Fiera, “spooning” into Tina’s other side, her head up, panting toward Jake with her goofy dog smile.

“I’m jealous. That’s my spot.”

“Oh?” Tina grinned. “Well, there’s nothing stopping you; Ben took off for a couple days.”

“Nah, I might get too frisky.” He sat on the bed.

“Pretty soon, Don Joaquín.” Tina patted his hand, then held it. “How’s Emma doing?”

“Nothing new since I called you. ‘Relatively stable,’ like they keep saying; they’re still concerned about the breathing not slowing down enough. The pediatrician said to check in with her at five-thirty, before she goes.” He glanced at the alarm clock. “Half an hour.”

“I was hoping she’d be doing even better by now.”

“Yeah, I know. At least she’s in the right place.”

Fiera couldn’t control her innate affability any longer; she jumped down and came around the bed to lick Jake’s hand. He rubbed her pointy ears; they drooped, as always, into the relaxed, floppy mode.

“Crazy mutt.” Jake lifted one of the dog’s ears.

“She doesn’t do that for just anybody, you know.”

“Right. Listen to who’s feeling a little better.”

Tina nodded. “I am feeling better.”

Jake looked over at the afghan. “I see you added more red to the border.”

“Yes, it’s finished for sure.”

“Does that still upset you?”

“No. I’m not sure why it did before.”

The phone rang in the hall; Jake got up to answer. Tina followed him, but she walked right by into the bathroom, leaving the door open.

“Hello?”

“Mister Friend?” It was a subdued female voice.

“Yes. Doctor Lowell?” *Wait, I was supposed to call her. Easy, it’s probably nothing.* Jake was holding the receiver away a couple of inches, but he could hear her grave, apologetic tone. *Oh, God, no.* Jake made himself put the phone to his ear. *No, no, no!*

“. . . and I’m afraid there’s no easy way to say it. Your daughter passed away a few minutes ago.”

No, goddamnit! He was vaguely aware of cramping in his chest. “Jesus, doctor, not just like that.”

“I’m so sorry, Mister Friend. Her breathing rate spiked after you left; we couldn’t get it under control. We did everything we could.”

Not enough, damn it.

When Jake didn't answer, the doctor continued solemnly. "It was likely pneumonia, Mister Friend. We'd have to do an autopsy to be completely sure."

What? The hell you will.

"Mister Friend?"

"No autopsy; leave her be, please." Then Jake heard himself say, "Thank you, doctor." He hung up the receiver, glared at it, then picked up the base and carried the telephone back to the kitchen, the long cord trailing behind. Jake kept on going right out the back door, the line catching in the screen.

"Shit!" he screamed, yanking on the cord. The phone slipped from his hand and fell to the concrete; its casing cracked like an egg. *Finish the job.* Jake grabbed his shovel and slammed it down on the device three times, like he did to the scorpion months before, but now he was silent, his tears falling into the shattered mess of wires, metal, and plastic.

Jesus—Tina. He tossed the shovel, then stumbled in a daze back inside to the hallway. Jake saw her on the bed, facing the wall again. "Tina," he said, scooting in behind her.

"Shh, I heard the call, Jake." She turned and they held each other, both of them crying. Fiera jumped up on the bed and stayed with them most of the night.



Just after dawn, Tina and Jake lay awake, embracing silently for nearly an hour before they got up and morosely took care of some daily chores, barely communicating. Taking Fiera out, Jake found the remnants of the telephone and realized he couldn't start on the burial arrangements without it. After the dog's walk, he and Tina made themselves discuss their immediate plans. Jake then went out to Loretta, notebook in hand, got in, and drove off for his school, crying again.

In the boys' lavatory, Jake slapped cold water on his face, then went into the office. Charging the calls to their home number, he was able to arrange for the burial in La Cholla the following afternoon. Next, he called Jesús; who of course offered his condolences and support. Jake explained what would and would not take place the next day, and asked Jesús to pass the information on to the handful of local people who needed to know.

Dreading the family calls, Jake started with Jimmy in New York, who took the news with that immutable Linn calmness, asking Jake to have Tina call him when she was up to it. Jimmy graciously took on the task of calling their mother and some other Linn relatives.

Okay, now Hannah. She'll handle all the Friends, then screw this for a while. He last spoke to his sister to explain all the particulars before the baby's transfer. Jake called and gave Hannah the news as factually as he could. Her normally tough persona fell apart right away, and she had to excuse herself. Jake waited for her, staring at some overdue supply orders for the new school year. *That crap was important a week ago.*

"Huey, I'm sorry. My bawling isn't helping anything."

"It's all right; you needed to do it."

"You sound like you're handling this as well as could be expected," she said around a final sob.

"I'm just cried out. Hannah, are you up to passing all this on to the rest of our family?"

"Of course I will."

"I really appreciate it."

"Jake, I can fly over and be there by Sunday."

"Thanks, Hannah, but we're going to have the burial right away—tomorrow; just the two of us."

"Oh, okay; I see. You have to do what's best for you guys." She paused. "Does that leave time for an autopsy?"

"No, it doesn't."

The line was quiet for seconds. "Jake, I wish I could say it's hard to believe that this happened again."

"That *what* happened again?"

"There's a specific name for your doctor's negligence. It's called 'preventable human medical error,' and there's plenty of legal precedent to nail him. You did keep all the documents?"

Jesus, Hannah. "I have no idea."

"That's okay. We'll be able to retrieve most of what we need, and you have some ideal witnesses. I'm proud of how you stood up to him, not to mention the hospital."

"Hannah, the hospital came through for us when it counted."

"I don't agree, but we can concentrate on the doctor, if that's what you want to do."

"No, I don't think so."

She was silent again for a few moments. "Jake, you're not going to let him off the hook, are you?"

"I guess we are. And don't tell me they get away with it because people like me don't go after them. I don't give a damn."

"Okay, Jake. Have you thought about the other people this doctor could harm someday?"

“Yeah, that does bother me, but Tina thinks he learned something. I’m going to trust her judgment.”

“Jake, please don’t decide this while you’re grieving. Do yourself a favor and let them do the autopsy. Then you can think about all of it later.”

Shit. “Hannah, just listen.” He paused to organize his thoughts. “If we sue Serna, you’d be expecting Castilleja, María, and Tina to testify. I sure as hell am not going to put them through a legal circus like Mom’s.”

“Great, so now you’re upset with me.”

“Not really. I’m glad you brought it up; then we won’t have to discuss it again.”

She sighed loud enough for Jake to hear. “So, that’s the end of it?”

“How can I make it any clearer, Hannah?” He realized that he sounded angrier than he wanted to.

“Okay, Jake.” She tried to muffle a sob.

Happy now, schmuck? He waited for her to come back on.

After a long sniff, she spoke. “Huey?”

“Hannah, I didn’t mean to bark at—”

“No, it’s my fault for pushing all that on you at a time like this. I’m sorry.”

“Forget it; I know you’re just trying to look out for us.”

“Yes, but maybe I’ll learn to butt out once in a while.” She paused. “Huey, what will you guys do now?”

“As soon as we can, we’ll try to get on with our lives.”

33

The burial took place the next afternoon at the town cemetery on a hill in the middle of La Cholla. The Friends requested that only themselves and the two officials be there. Wearing their everyday school clothes, Tina and Jake watched the funeral director in his formal black suit place the impossibly small coffin in the ground.

Jake took out a short poem he rewrote ten times the night before. He finally gave up on the revisions, knowing it would never be right, never be adequate; never be appropriate. Standing on freshly-cut grass with Tina in the shade of an old elm, Jake read it aloud anyway, barely able to say the eleven words:

*Mother Earth,
Take this girl
Never given
From your omnipotent womb.*

The Friends held each other a short while, then walked hand in hand down to the dirt parking lot. Jake saw someone standing in a dark suit and tie by the truck's bed. A Karmann Ghia was parked about twenty feet behind Loretta where Ben, in his best clothes, stood behind the doctor.

Her eyes swollen but dry, Tina said, "Good, I'm glad they're here."

"Yeah, me too." Jake and Tina walked a little faster, as if concerned that the doctor and Ben would leave.

"Mister and Mrs. Friend," Castilleja said as they approached, "we just wanted to pay our respects. Please forgive the intrusion."

"No intrusion, doctor. We're glad to see you both." Jake let go of Tina to shake hands with him. She walked over to Ben, who looked desolate as Tina hugged him.

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

Jake went to his student and put an arm around him. "It's okay, Ben." Jake let his arm down. "We want to thank you both for everything you did."

The doctor nodded with his eyes closed, then looked at Tina. "I'm so sorry I wasn't able to do—"

"No," she interrupted, "you were wonderful; you don't need to be sorry for anything." Tina hugged him with both arms, then let go, weeping a little. She hurried up to the front door of the truck. Jake thanked the doctor again and told Ben they would see him later at the house. He walked over to Loretta and climbed in.

Jake drove out of the cemetery, Tina sitting silently beside him on the bench seat. He had called María that morning to ask to drop by; they found her place after a few minutes on one of the oldest streets in town, a row of clapboard houses on large lots, each poor structure surrounded by shade trees and gardens.

María's small yellow house, closed up to the heat, had two picture windows in front and a huge swamp cooler chugging away at the side beneath a magnificent old weeping willow, the ends of its whip-like branches sweeping along the ground. The house had no lawn out front, just a narrow stepping-stone path between María's two gardens, one of them a wanton display of bright blossoms, including six-foot sunflowers at the far end. Her other garden was bountiful with all sorts of vegetables, the corn tassels at the back even taller than the sunflowers.

Both front windows of María's house were draped inside with white material; Jake saw a birdcage through a gap in one curtain. He parked, they climbed down; Jake opened the back door. He lifted out a bulky package the size of a large laundry basket, but it was light, wrapped all around in white tissue. Jake followed Tina on the path up to the front door; she pressed the buzzer, then took the screen's handle to let him go first.

María came to the door in a black cotton housedress; her withered features drooped even more than usual, but without any tears. "*Señor, Señora Fren. Please come in.*" She ignored the parcel Jake carried.

They thanked her, and entered; she showed them to a sofa covered with an orange throw. María said she would be right back, then walked through an alcove on the way to her kitchen. Her four blue parakeets and two canaries chattered away in three cages, basking and preening in the streak of sunlight allowed in by the gap in the curtains.

Jake put the package on the other side of Tina, and sat next to her on the soft cushions. Several prints of sunflowers and daisies brightened three of María's light green walls; real cut flowers and live plants occupied almost every table and nook. Family pictures in white frames covered another wall

above a table with numerous stand-up photos of graduations and weddings. If she owned a radio or TV, she didn't keep either in her living room.

María's religious shrine in one corner displayed four lit white candles in glass holders, a six-inch ivory Virgin, and a simple, non-ghastly wooden crucifix.

"As I expected, very homey," Tina said.

"Yeah." He got up and walked over to see the birds just before María ambled in from the kitchen holding a tray with three frosty glasses of citrus *agua*, a lime wedge on each rim. Jake told María he liked her birds, and then carried the drinks for her over to a coffee table in front of the couch. Tina and Jake thanked her as they took their refreshments and María sat down with hers, opposite them in a heavy, padded wooden rocker.

"¿*La niña, she is buried?*" María asked Tina bluntly.

"Sí, señora."

"¿*No service?*"

"No, no service." Tina lowered her head.

"¿*Will you pray with me, Señora Fren?*"

Tina put down her glass, as did María, they moved over to her shrine and stood next to each other. María grasped and kissed some beads she carried, crossed herself, and murmured toward the religious icons. Tina closed her eyes.

Jake stood up out of respect and shuffled slowly to María's photo gallery. *All the damn praying sure did us a lot of good. Jesus, to each his own, Jake.* He found a snapshot of María standing at the center of a score of smiling family members, a busy barbecue taking place in the background. *They definitely know how lucky they are to have her.* His vision blurring, Jake turned to see María and Tina come back to sit down. He returned to the sofa.

Tina, her own face damp, saw Jake's tears as he sat; she took his hand. "You okay?"

Jake attempted a smile. "No, not really," he mumbled, and then lifted his glass for a drink.

"¿*Señor y Señora Fren, are you planning to stay and teach here?*"

Jake put down his glass and took a deep breath to dampen his emotions. "Uh, no, señora; we have decided to leave after we find new jobs."

"I am sorry to hear that, but I believe to stay here after something like this, you need to have family nearby. ¿*Will you go back to live near them?*"

"No, we are not going to do that." Again, Jake tried to smile.

"I am sorry," María said, "*this is something I do not understand.*"

After dabbing her eyes with a napkin, Tina took a sip of her drink, and put the glass down. "*Señora, this is for you.*" Tina touched the thin white paper next to her.

MARÍA JUANA'S GIFT

“¿Señora Fren, a gift on a day like this?”

“Sí, María. Thanks to you, we were given a chance to save our child.” Tina's tears flowed again. *“We think of you as family; when we have a daughter someday, she will have your name.”* Tina stood and took the package to María, hugged her, then sat back down with Jake.

María pulled out a fold in the tissue and saw the afghan. *“It is very beautiful. I saw you work so hard on this, señora.”*

“Sí, María. Maybe because of that, you will remember us.”

“I no forget,” María said, speaking for the first time in English to Tina and Jake.

E N D

Book III in The American Teachers Series

LOS ANGELES, 1968:
HAPPY RANCH TO
WATTS

A NOVEL BY
T. LLOYD WINETSKY

LOS ANGELES, 1968:

HAPPY RANCH TO
WATTS

BOOK 3 OF THE AMERICAN TEACHERS SERIES

T. Lloyd Winetsky

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Los Angeles, 1968: Happy Ranch to Watts
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Excerpt from “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin
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Many of the historical events of 1968 in this novel are portrayed as the author recalls and with the support of archival information. Most of the location names in Southern California are real; the names of the public schools are not. Any similarities between the fictitious characters or schools with actual persons or schools are coincidental.

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Although this story only touches on the significance of their lives, the author humbly dedicates this work to the memory of four great twentieth century leaders in the order of the deranged violence that took them all:

Mohandas Gandhi
John F. Kennedy
Martin Luther King Jr.
Robert F. Kennedy.

~

One dollar from each sale of this book reported to the author will be donated to La Casa Hogar, a non-profit advocacy and educational agency for farmworker families in Yakima, Washington.

~

*This world is white no longer,
and it will never be white again.*

– James Baldwin

1

Monday came fast, and Allen was heading for Watts—not to pass by on the way to some ballgame, and not because he would take a wrong exit off the freeway. *Rolling on down there on purpose—like it was nothing.*

He had twenty-five minutes before his ten-thirty a.m. appointment with a teacher who was supposed to be his mentor. He drove his grey-primered '51 Volvo down the off-ramp from the Harbor Freeway; it was about eight blocks to the school, right through the heart of Watts. *You can still turn around.* Before Allen came down to a green light at the first surface street, he cranked his windows most of the way up, locked the doors, then made his turn.

The neighborhood looked similar to an area he'd once ridden by to play JV baseball in a different part of South-Central L.A. The houses had that same post-Depression stucco-or-frame-with-a-dash-of-Spain architecture as his neighborhood, Los Feliz. Some places were well cared for but seemed to be under siege from the surrounding ramshackle houses with dirt yards, scrounging dogs, and trash of all kinds around discarded appliances and vehicles.

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The school district secretary had told him it was an “in-service day between semesters,” so there were kids everywhere making the best of their day off, chasing around and having fun as if the whole neighborhood were just a run-down playground.

A few adults wandered past a guy with an Afro the size of a beach ball; he watched Allen’s car from the stoop of a small shopworn market. A siren shrieked from the next block, but hardly anyone bothered to watch the cop car go by.

He made a turn and there were the Watts Towers, just ahead. Allen had only seen the seventeen spires on TV, but he grew up hearing about them from Los Feliz bullies . . . *gonna tie you kids to one of ’em and leave you down there for the boogies.*

Now the actual towers seemed less menacing, like a pointy skyline on some gaseous planet visited by Flash Gordon. He still drove by as fast as the law and traffic allowed. Allen had to stop for a red light, where a boy in his early teens, perched on a fire hydrant, blasted Motown from his portable stereo. A fair-skinned woman in heavy makeup and a thin dress—she could have been thirty or sixty—slouched in the remains of a phone booth. She was trembling, though it was warm for the beginning of February, even for L.A.

The DTs—Jesus. “Who were you expecting—Aretha?”

A black man in the next lane heard Allen speaking to his windshield. Behind the wheel of a brand-new white ’68 Chevy, company logo on its door, he was in a suit and tie. The salesman looked down his nose at the old Volvo, then at Allen, who glared back. The man turned away.

Allen didn’t have to stop again before his turn onto Harding Place; the school was just ahead, its front building almost a city block long and attached to eight-foot chain-link that surrounded the grounds. There were only two cars out front; he didn’t see anyone walking around as he pulled to the curb.

The building was another of L.A.’s three-story, flat-roofed halls of learning, except it was more worn out than his schools, and the windows on the bottom two floors were covered with army-green steel grating. The chalky white-brick exterior was cracked in places; illegible black initials had been sprayed over two blotchy stains. Behind a yellowing lawn, half-dead arborvitae covered in spider webs stood tall along the front of the school like a line of dusty dark-green sentinels.

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He turned the other way to another fence, this one drooping and only four feet tall around three sides of a paved but potholed city lot guarded by a large windowless security hut. Its crude Dutch door bolted and padlocked, the shack could have once been a mother-in-law cottage.

The parking lot was about two-thirds full of vehicles. Allen entered, took the first open spot and turned off the motor. Still with more than fifteen minutes, he looked at the school, shaking his head.

The interview panel he'd faced before the weekend consisted of five veteran teachers and a vice-principal named Godina, the only one who introduced himself; the others just read aloud the brief questions. The entire process took twenty minutes. They had three hours to hire eight emergency teachers for Thurgood Marshall Junior High, recently renamed from Warren G. Harding, Godina said, "to honor the first Negro Supreme Court Justice."

When the vice-principal asked Allen why he wanted to teach, his answer was, "Maybe I can help some kids with skills they need to make it through school." *Pretty good for BS I made up on the spot.* Only Godina and an elderly redheaded woman didn't seem to scowl at his answer. He was sure that an honest vote would have gone against him, including the only black teacher; she was glaring at Allen by the time it was finished. He began to doubt his decision as soon as he accepted the job.

Now he was gazing at the nearby cars—a rusty T-Bird, a renovated Chevy from the late '40s, a new '68 Bug—maybe they would tell him something about the people in the school. *Stalling—move it, chicken-shit.* He reached for his windbreaker, but it was getting very warm, so he left it and got out. With some difficulty, he tucked his new Pittsburgh Pirates T-shirt into the snug size-38 belled black jeans he'd bought the day before.

Allen locked the car, then entered the crosswalk at the end of the driveway, carrying a book he'd been reading. He crossed slowly, went up a few steps to the front door and peeked through a pane at a dozen or so kids and parents, all black, standing in line, likely to get something solved for the new semester.

He backed off from the door and turned around to the lot. His dilapidated car, familiar and comfortable, seemed to beckon him. Before Allen moved forward or back, a drowsy boy opened the door, looked around, and said, "It's open."

"Yeah, thanks." The kid didn't answer and got back in line as Allen entered.

T. Lloyd Winetsky

The hallway, clean but scuffed, had a glass trophy case and a lot of old wooden trim. He looked up at a clock protected by thick wire, then read some of the chintzy trophies and photo captions from as far back as the '30s.

Allen sighed, then ambled toward the office. A woman in line grimaced at him as if he had just crawled out of the L.A. River. He nodded to her and said, "Morning." She turned away, and he entered the office. She was probably the first black person he had spoken to since he last chatted with the mailman.

A secretary, about five-four and in her mid-twenties, stood behind the far end of the counter, quietly preoccupied with two families. She had flawless café au lait skin, slightly pointed ears and nose, striking dark eyes and a short, neat, light-brown Afro. He couldn't help but notice how nicely she filled out her pastel-yellow pantsuit. Surreptitiously, he watched her answer the phone, listen to a parent in line, and shuffle papers—all at once. *Hell, she's the one who should be teaching.*

Seeing no one else in the office, he checked the time on a wooden clock that had Roman numerals and a pendulum. Hopefully his mentor would be that redheaded lady from the interview who seemed to be on his side.

The secretary hung up the phone and looked at him pleasantly. "May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm supposed to meet Mrs. Dorsey now."

"She's probably just leaving her meeting. I'm sure Miss Dorsey will be right down." She turned to the people in line.

"Thanks." *Man, that smile.* He leaned on the counter and opened his paperback covered with two glossy pages from a Dodger Stadium program. He found where he left off with Ray Bradbury, then tried to read, but his mind wandered—first to the cute secretary, then to the out-of-the-blue phone call from his friend, proposing that he apply for some teaching jobs.

"So what's the desperate emergency, Dan?"

"The openings are in ghetto schools—teachers quitting at midyear, or they already left."

"They're going to send an untrained white guy to East L.A.?" *To get the living crap beat out of him?*

"There, or South-Central."

Allen snapped out of his recollection as the same black teacher who'd glared during his interview walked toward him from an interior corridor.

She was about five-ten and stick-thin; he had maybe four inches on her and enough pounds to make another small adult. She wore a white top under a plain tan suit made of heavy twill, and her skirt, right out of the '50s, was below the knees. The lady came closer; an old-fashioned brooch was pinned to the lapel of her open coat, and a small gold cross hung in front of her high-buttoned blouse by a thin necklace.

“Mister Greene.”

Mister. His tongue sticking to the roof of his dry mouth, Allen just nodded and attempted a smile.

“In case you do not recall, I am Miss Dorsey.” Her words sounded intentionally formal, the *Miss* made very clear.

Moistening his lips, he reached out to her. “Miss Dorsey.”

As if he were contagious, she barely grasped his fingers. She seemed to look askance at his spare tire, made worse by the tight jeans. She saw his paperback. “A baseball book?”

“No, science.” *With Martians.*

“This way.” Holding a folder and a small grey purse, she led him out a side door into the empty hallway. Her skin wasn't light or dark brown, but almost raven; she was the darkest black American he had ever seen in person. Before she'd read aloud in the interview, Allen half-expected her to have an accent like some of the African students at his college.

Dorsey was around fifty, with a countenance somewhere between plain and homely. She had straight black hair that stopped abruptly at mid-neck in a hint of a wave; her mouth, nose, eyes and cheeks seemed disproportionately compressed like a puppet with a partially flattened head. Maybe her face would fill out if she ever smiled.

She turned but looked past him. “Where is it that you live, Mister Greene?”

“Los Feliz, just before Glendale.”

She made an even deeper scowl. “I have heard about Glendale.” They entered a conference room. Dorsey stopped at a table and turned, sneering for a moment at his long curly black hair, full moustache, and mutton chops. “With so many applicants last Friday, I do not remember much about your college background other than your English degree.”

“Valley College, my BA's from L.A. State.”

“Yes, no education courses or student teaching, if I recall correctly.”

T. Lloyd Winetsky

“That’s right.”

“And how did you find out about our openings?”

“A friend of mine teaches math. He just finished student teaching in East L.A.”

“Oh? We are still one teacher short, and it happens to be in mathematics. I assume he has a job.”

“Yes, he does.”

“And what was it that you have been doing since college?”

“Delivering flowers mostly.”

“Flowers. Please have a seat while I get your materials.” She practically marched to the far end of the long conference table, her medium heels clicking in cadence on the buffed linoleum floor.

Allen’s last answer had him mulling over his omissions and fibs since Friday. For starters, he had been delivering flowers for only a month and still had the part-time job. On the district application, he obfuscated the fact that his degree took six years, and he didn’t list a post-college two-month stint in the Peace Corps, quitting after “medical” problems. She started back to him with folders, a binder, and a textbook in her twig-like arms. *Did I mention, Miss Dorsey, that I hated school since sixth grade?*

She put the materials down and sat one chair away from him, priggishly stretching her long skirt over joined knees. “Is there something troubling you, Mister Greene?”

“No.”

“You appear to be upset.”

“Just a little nervous.”

“Not surprising.” Her face changed from serious to cross. “Before we begin, I need to clarify some things.”

Allen just nodded again.

“I do not support the idea of placing untrained staff in our lowest track, but no one in the department would switch. To be direct about it, I agreed to mentor you and Mister Fife to get the extra planning time, and because I don’t want our school to end up with more . . . pardon me, it is not my place to say that.” She made a frustrated sigh, then continued.

“Anyway, I cannot teach you to be a teacher—one either finds a passion for it, or one does not. If a prospective teacher has indeed made a conscious

decision to help students—I am sorry to say that some have not—I believe he or she can learn through experience. You see, without genuine expectations for students or new teachers to learn, we can be very sure they won't." After that rare contraction, Dorsey paused again.

He took paper from the back of his book and began to take notes.

"Now, if you are here just to draw a check, I will use my time with you to make sure you do what is required until June, if you last that long. Then you could go sell cars or join a commune. I don't care."

"Um—"

"Excuse me, but you do not need to respond to that, your actions will show your motives. My responsibilities will be to observe your instruction, review lesson plans and answer questions. Mister Godina will occasionally be with me for official evaluation. Do you have any questions so far?"

"Not yet."

She reached for the thick LANGUAGE ARTS book. "Seventh-grade instructional goals correspond to this text. For track-one students it is not necessary to use it all of the time, especially if there is an effort to teach them basic grammar and phonics. Most of our track-one students want to read. Some will even pretend to be reading when just looking at pictures . . ."

Dorsey soon transitioned into a description of materials, equipment and a lack thereof, followed by several more minutes to explain some obvious recordkeeping. ". . . and teachers *must* turn in report cards on time." Handing him the three-ring binder, she frowned at the eye-patched Pirate logo on his shirt. "You will find the school rules in here and also posted in every room. This handbook is required reading, and I suggest close attention to the section on professional guidelines, including facial hair, dress . . ."

He waited for her to pause. "This isn't what I would wear tomorrow, Miss Dorsey."

"I did not expect so, Mister Greene." Dorsey went on to the subject of discipline. "The key is to have clear consequences. When a teacher is firm but fair, a few students will complain, but most will respect it. Later on, the teacher can begin to ease off a little. A permissive approach," she raised a brow at Allen's clothes again, "or downright meanness—neither extreme *ever* works here. Most of our students will behave if given a chance."

She seemed to be reading his body language, staring coldly at Allen for a moment, as if daring him to differ.

T. Lloyd Winetsky

“In twenty-two years, Mister Greene, I have never had one class in which I did not think most of my students were taking care of business, which I define as trying. Unfortunately, trying to learn does not always translate to academic success. Willing but low-achieving students deserve as much time as we can give them.”

He jotted again. “And the ones who aren’t trying?”

“Our apathetic students include a few individuals in special education, but many in that program are hard workers. Most students who don’t try have normal IQs or higher and have been convinced over the years that they are dull—I believe it is the teacher’s job to disabuse them of that notion.”

Dorsey drew a breath and removed a hankie from her pocket for a quick and proper nose wiping. She turned to him, almost wistfully. “And we do have a small number of openly aggressive students who have mostly quit on themselves *and* everyone else. They can be both destructive and self-destructive—their attendance is usually poor, although their abilities also vary. We cannot give up on them either, but a teacher must be practical and not allow a student who is acting up to disrupt learning or abuse the other students or . . . the teacher.”

“And how often, um, would you expect those kids to—”

“That also varies.” She looked at him askance again. “It is not unusual to have two or three students in each class with records of aggression, plus one or two more who might cross that line with peer pressure. The procedure for emergency assistance is outlined in the handbook. The reality is that the more a teacher requests it, the less quickly they will respond.”

“So if a teacher really needs help and calls, then nobody shows up, what does he do?”

“His best, Mister Greene. Prevention is our most effective tool. As I said, it is imperative to establish concrete consequences, and then be firm but fair. Keep saying that to yourself, and it will go well most of the time. You will need to be especially strict in homeroom—seventh-grade boys from all three tracks, some of whom do not see each other all day, except in there. Discipline is also supported by good time management—using more than a minute or two just to get started is a waste of time that invites chaos”

She explained some basic methods for starting class, and then said, “That’s

Los Angeles, 1968

about it, except for your questions. See the secretary in the morning for keys and your attendance—”

“The one who’s there today?”

She glowered at his eager question. “No, she’s Miss Watson—Mrs. Venable is the head secretary. Miss Watson mostly handles reception, registration, supplies and orders. By the way, if you need something that is not already in the school, she probably will not be able get it for you. Other questions?”

“Can I see the room?”

“Not with Mrs. Venable out today, unless you care to run down someone who has a master key. The room is like any other. I have told you what to expect to find in there.”

“Okay. What about the Creative Writing class?”

“Yes, I did forget to mention that.”

“Are they all track-one kids too?”

A faint pallor materialized on her flat nose. “I am sure you are aware, Mister Greene, that a *kid* is a baby goat. The *students* in that class will be seventh graders from all three tracks, some of whom did not get the elective they requested. The handbook has broad goals for Creative Writing, but the teacher decides the activities.”

“How *creative* can the writing be?”

Her glare endured. “As some of them won’t be able to write a complete sentence, that might be a logical place to begin. So, do you still want the job?”

He stared at her.

“Well?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” As they stood, she handed over everything with a scornful crease of a grin that did not fill out her squashed features. “Very well, then, Mister Greene, perhaps we will see you tomorrow.”

Yeah, perhaps. “Thanks for your help.”

2

After the meeting, Allen still wanted to see a classroom. He stopped at the first one and looked in through some thin wires embedded in the rectangular porthole's glass. With all the shades down in the unlit room, he could make out rows of desks and not much more.

Allen walked to the foyer and saw Miss Watson typing in the office. He went right outside—it was useless to talk to her if he decided not to come back. *Good excuse.* The parking lot was still quiet; he got into his car. *Like Dan says, Ex-lax a minute.*

He leaned all the way back, closed his eyes, and focused on his breathing until his mind was clear. Then he listened to individual sounds, trying to think only about the next noise: *distant siren —chattering mockingbird—the city's hum.* He had been reading some Far-Eastern thought for months. Dan called him *Gunga Din* after Allen tried to explain that he was experimenting with his own take on “mindful breathing.” *Car horn—slamming door—buzzing inse—*

A loud explosion jolted him straight up. He hunched right back down, peered through the steering wheel and carefully scanned the street and the parked cars. *Firecracker—freak out, why don't you?* He sat up slowly, checking the building. A uniformed guard calmly strolled along the sidewalk while a tall woman walked down the school's front steps with a small boy.

Allen put in the clutch but let it out. After another deep breath, he looked at the English book on the passenger seat. Maybe he could take the job and find his own apartment. *Get away from that bastard for good.*

He put the transmission into first, turned the key, then slowly left the lot, locking the doors. Allen passed right by the mother and son he'd just seen;

they were side-by-side, waiting on the curb and laughing about something. It was possible that the kid was in one of his classes and couldn't read a lick.

Driving cautiously but at the speed limit away from the school, his mind flashed to his own childhood, shopping with his mom downtown and staring at a pretty "Negro" woman who had a boy his age in tow. Allen was fascinated when the kid begged for snacks the way he always did. When they left the store, a white teen at a shoeshine stand had yelled at an old black man, "Boy, hurry up with my shine." Allen's mom wouldn't talk about something like that, but his dad liked to include him in light-hearted debates with Negro men at minor-league ball games in those pre-Dodger days.

So? You don't have a clue about any of this. Allen reached down for a cartridge from the shoebox on the floor. He inserted *The Ventures Play Telstar* into the eight-track player Dan had installed for him under the dash. Trying to suppress everything that was on his mind, he drummed on the steering wheel almost all the way to Los Feliz, rewinding the one tune with any words—three. He growled "Tequila" in an exaggerated deep voice each time it came around.

He stopped for gas in Atwater, then walked into Bill's Place and called, "Hey, Tommy, French fries and a shot of tequila." He took it with lime and ate the potatoes, nursing a cold draft that he ordered. Allen began to rehash his situation at home and everything from the morning. He had a second shot of tequila, ruminated some more, then got up.

What the hell. He walked to the pay phone and called the flower shop in West Hollywood. Although his boss knew about the interview, Allen apologized for not giving her more notice, but she congratulated him effusively. *For what?* Half drunk, he went to the barber next door and blithely asked to be trimmed "about halfway to respectable."

He arrived at home after one; his brother-in-law's new white pick-up was unexpectedly in the driveway, McMANUS FULL SERVICE and the phone number stenciled on the doors. Allen pulled the Volvo to the curb in front of the boxy little tan house and spotted Rick in the long narrow space between their place and the neighbor's tall thick oleander hedge.

Allen got out of the car with his things. Rick was in a T-shirt and swimming trunks, fooling around near the back of the house. Heat waves pulsed from the black screen at the top of the robot-shaped trash incinerator that hadn't been used for years.

T. Lloyd Winetsky

He walked onto the small front lawn, glowering at Rick, who began to walk up the shaded lane. Allen's refuge as a kid, the space was just wide enough there for him and sometimes a friend to play catch or shoot cans, mess around with bugs, make forts in the hedge, or play with his legions of plastic cowboys and Indians.

Allen stopped beneath their tall old avocado tree as his brother-in-law approached, a long fiberglass surfboard under one arm. In his early thirties, Rick wasn't close to his professed height of five-nine, but he was both slim and muscular. Allen's pretty sister and her tan, rugged-looking husband still had the reputation as one of the handsomest couples from Adams High, although they weren't involved much in school social life—he was into cars and surfing, and Trudy volunteered at hospitals.

Rick's long and unruly bleached-blond hair lit up in the sunlight as he passed the corner of the house. Allen took some steps in his direction. "What're you burning back there?"

"None a' your damn business." Flip-flops slapping at his heels, he moved his bantam stocky frame toward the driveway.

"It's against the law."

Rick stopped and rested an end of the board on the grass, looking at Allen suspiciously. "What is?"

"Burning, what do you think?"

"Who gives a shit?" He picked up the surfboard. "You take that job? Maybe you can finally pay your way around here."

"How much money will you make in Malibu today?"

"Mel's got my shift. Answer my damn question."

"I start tomorrow."

"Where's the school?"

"Beverly Hills, what do you care?"

"Where the hell is it?"

"Watts."

"What? Are you nuts?" He made a horselaugh. "The niggers'll waste you without blinkin' an eye."

"Your concern is touching. You don't know what you're talking about."

"More 'n you do. They come by the station on the way to Griffith—it's spook city over there on weekends now."

“So? It’s a public park.” Allen started for the house.

Rick laughed again as he came to his pick-up. “Man, you better stick with bein’ a flower boy.” He secured his board in the truck bed. “You won’t last one day, fat-ass.” He got in and backed out of the driveway, still guffawing.

Allen walked up the driveway and under his mother’s old rose arbor toward the back door. He and Trudy had lived by themselves for years in the family’s small Los Feliz home after their parents’ death when he was sixteen. The insurance paid off the house and debts, but the bills piled up, so he took more delivery hours. Everything changed after Trudy quit her Master’s in Social Work and Rick moved in. Allen knew the McManus brothers and had attempted to warn her. After she married him, Allen tried to butt out, staying with them on and off. Now, after a miscarriage, she was seven months pregnant.

He went in but didn’t feel like going down to the *cave*, Trudy’s name for his primitive digs in the half-basement. He had given up his small bedroom recently for the baby and for Rick’s barbells, but Allen hadn’t really settled in downstairs, keeping most of his scant possessions in boxes.

After splashing cold water on his face in the kitchen, he sat at the oval cherry-wood dining-room table in front of his typewriter, reference books, and a file-box full of personal papers. He picked up the school handbook without opening it. A minute or two later, he caught himself staring at his mother’s furniture, china and silverware.

Trudy can keep it all, except Pedro. Sleeping on his perch near the sunny dining-room window, Pedro was an old powder-blue and black parakeet with touches of white. He had been trained diligently by Allen and his mom to speak at least a dozen phrases; Trudy even helped sometimes. Rick constantly bellyached about the bird, but Allen refused to move him down to the musty basement.

Pedro woke up and danced a little jig, squawking his favorite refrain, “Geev Pedro beeg kees, beeg kees”—a line from a cartoon that Allen and Trudy liked as kids.

Allen walked over and put his face to the cage at the top of a five-foot stand. “Okay, boy.” Pedro jumped, attaching his feet to the wire by Allen’s lips. With the bird’s rapt attention, Allen repeated, “I tot I taw a puddy tat” about ten times, then said, “Sorry, ol’ bird, that’s it.” Pedro flitted to his favorite perch, where he began to chatter back to sleep.

T. Lloyd Winetsky

He spent the afternoon trying to make sense of his teaching goals and meager resources, stopping only to stretch or talk to Pedro. After five o'clock snuck up on him, Allen sighed; he only had the crappy textbook plus a couple of ideas for Creative Writing, but Dan had offered to help him and was expecting a call.

Not wanting Trudy to worry about his dinner, he wrote her a note, then changed Pedro's water and seed. As if to thank him, the bird bowed over and over and began to cluck. Allen picked up his school materials and left the room; Pedro had stopped the noises and was saying, "I'm a chicken, I'm a chicken . . ."

Allen was back at Bill's by six. After having a burger, onion rings and a beer, he bought his favorite chocolate-coated honeycomb candy bar from a vending machine and ate a third of it on his way to the pay phone. He dialed Dan's number, listening to the billiard balls slamming and clicking. The Beatles caterwauled "All you need is love" ad nauseum from the jukebox.

Dan's phone clicked. "*¡Bueno!*" he answered in anglicized Spanish.

"What's that about, O'Mara?"

"You're not the only one who speaks some *español*," he said, the "pan" as in *panda*.

"Sounds great. You guys eating?"

"We're finished, Jen's giving the baby a bath. Sounds like you're at Bill's again. Having another gut bomb?"

"Salad."

"Sure, Chubs. So, are you going through with the job?"

"I am for tomorrow."

"You sound thrilled. I warned you it wouldn't be easy."

"I know. C'mon, Master of Education, share some of your extensive knowledge."

"That's *expensive* knowledge, and just in math."

"Okay, listen . . ." He told about the meeting with Dorsey, explaining first how she sneered at his clothes and hair. Dan had a good laugh, then Allen told him some details and finally finished with, "She's tough, but you can tell she cares about what she does."

"Yeah, maybe. She did give you a lot of good advice."

"I know, but I'm lost on the actual teaching."

Los Angeles, 1968

“Just start out by seeing what they can and can’t do. Then, hell, you’re the damn writer, and the book should give you some broad ideas. Look, I’m probably as nervous as you are.”

“How do you figure that?”

“The district moved me since I talked to you. I have eighth-graders tomorrow.”

“Damn, just like that? Are you all bummed?”

“Nah. With all the turnover, I’ll be back in high school by next year.”

“Do you still have mostly Mexican kids?”

“Yeah, thank God they didn’t send me to South-Central.”

“Thanks, that makes me feel better.”

“You might be okay down there, you’ve always been, uh—”

“Always been what?”

“You know what I mean, nobody could even say *coons* or *spades* without you having a friggin’ cow.”

“So what? How does that matter tomorrow?”

“Actually, it could be a problem for you.”

“Now what are you talking about?” Allen had some pique in his voice.

“Ex-lax, will you? Let me think it through. By the way, it’s *Latino* now, not”

Dan’s brief lecture reminded Allen that Dorsey hadn’t used any racial term at all—he would stick with *black*, what the younger leaders from South-Central were saying on TV.

“. . . now there are families from Cuba, Puerto—”

“Okay, Dan, I get it.”

“Hey, about what I said a minute ago—you remember when we were around twelve, shooting cans in the L.A. River, and we all got into that fight?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Don’t get pissed, hear me out.”

“I’m not pissed.”

“It all started because you shot Damon.”

“In the shoe, with a BB.”

“Yeah, from an air-rifle—because he wouldn’t stop trying to kill birds.”

“So? I’d probably do it again.”

“Exactly. Look, your, uh, *sensitivity* for the underdog could get you in

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trouble down there tomorrow. What I'm saying is keep your eyes open and watch out for yourself first."

"Jesus, I know that. I was scared shitless half the morning. I don't have any delusions—it's good ol' one day at a time—hell, one hour at a time. I'll see if I can handle it."

"Good philosophy, Gunga Din."

"Thanks, smart-ass."

"Talking about Damon reminds me—I saw him with Gary at a Lakers game. They said to say hi."

Demon and his spawn.

"Allen?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Man, you do carry a grudge. It's a wonder you're still friends with *me*."

"Bull, you know anybody else I let call me *Chubs*?"

"Your sister."

"Not anymore, she calls me *Bear*. You and I will be friends until you get sick of me, and you know it."

"Yeah, don't get mushy. Ha, I just got it—Trudy calls you *Bear* because you live down in the cave. Maybe *she's* the one who's getting sick of you."

"She's sick of me arguing with Rick the Prick."

"Find the right woman, and you'd be outta there in nothing flat."

"Don't hold your breath."

"Maybe it'd help if you didn't talk about 'Walden' and his pond when you go on a date. Look, I'm worried about something else for tomorrow—now maybe I'll really piss you off."

Allen chuckled.

"Good, laugh a little. All right, I'm wondering how you're going to deal with the school, the same things you called bullshit on at Adams after your mom and dad—sorry, man, I—"

"Forget it. That's what you think I'll do?"

"No, just the opposite—you'll have your face in a damn book all the time, and now you're into this Gunga Din crap. It's not just Damon and the rest—at college, people thought you were pissed whether you were or not."

"That's their problem."

"Okay, but only up to a point—you have to get along with those teachers tomorrow. I'm not saying kiss their asses, just make nice a little."

“Sounds like your handy hints on women.”

“It’s similar. Rub a few elbows, keep the teachers off your back and save your energy for the classroom—that’s where you’ll need it.”

“Okay, so give me some good lines for the teachers.”

“It isn’t difficult—start by smiling like Howdy Doody, then just stick to sports or the weather.”

“I think I can handle that.”

“Never know, Chubs, there might be a fine young teacher there you can schmooze.”

Or a certain secretary. “You’re a broken record, O’Mara. I’m going to the library for a while to work on my plans. You’ve actually been some help, even the Dear Abby crap.”

“You’re welcome. Call me this weekend, sooner if you want. See ya, Bear.”

“Say hi to Jen.” Allen hung up and stared at the last hunk of candy in the wrapper. He tossed it into a trashcan.

On his way out of the tavern, “All you need is love” was moralizing again from the jukebox. *Geez, give it a rest.*



Up early the next day, Allen avoided his family and visited with Pedro. The morning was mild when he left, almost cool; he stopped for coffee and a donut. Just at seven, a half-hour before his starting time, he pulled into the staff parking lot. There were no kids around, only a few cars had arrived ahead of him, and the old shack in the lot was closed again.

He parked, then picked up his sturdy waxed fruit box, complete with lid and air holes, its sides printed with plump Golden Delicious apples and lush green leaves. He started for the street, the half-empty box and Bradbury under one arm.

The school’s front door was locked, but a parent let him in; he walked past a line of kids and adults waiting for Miss Watson. She was deftly handling multiple tasks again, much too busy for him to barge in with a *good morning*.

Several feet behind the other end of the counter, a light-complected, dark-freckled, very heavy black woman in her fifties completely covered an office chair in her tent-like tan shift—not even the casters were visible. She was involved in a loud personal phone call. Allen moved closer and saw MRS.

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VENABLE on her desk sign. He put his box on the counter; the offices behind the secretaries appeared to be empty.

Allen started to open his book but remembered Dan's advice. He stood there until the older secretary finally hung up and started typing. "Excuse me, I'm new here—Allen Greene."

She raised her head and peered at the box, then at him. He checked the "presentability" of his clothes, a light-blue dress shirt and half-belled navy chinos.

The secretary furrowed her dark brows. "Allen Greene?" He nodded back; she chortled without smiling and jotted on a pad. "Works for today."

What?

The woman pointed her pencil at the short door below his knees. "The lock is on this side—I'm Mrs. Venable."

"Yes, hi." He picked up the box, reached over to flick the lock, and walked in. Before Allen came close, Venable had one hand on her phone and the other in the air like a traffic cop.

"The mailboxes, Mister Greene, are in there." She pointed to a hallway between two small offices. "Your room is 329—upstairs. In your box, you'll find keys, the bulletin, student schedules, papers to fill out, roll book, and class lists. Read *all* of the bulletin before you come back with any questions, and nothing non-vital on the PA system. Mister Schultz wanted to meet with the eight of you before school, but he was called away—he'll arrange something soon. Do you have a mentor?"

"Yes, Miss Dorsey. I—"

"Good, she's at the south end of your floor, room 365. I suggest you see *her* with any questions." She turned to the telephone and began to dial. "Welcome to Thurgood Marshall."

He walked into the office corridor; a middle-aged white woman in a business suit glanced at him dismissively as she entered a door marked TEACHER'S LOUNGE. He found an entire wall of wooden cubbyholes, the name labels at eye level and below. Not finding his, he spotted eight boxes segregated at the very top—the second one, evidently a typo, said MISS GREENE. Allen reached up for his pile of papers and found an envelope with a regular key and a small one. Keeping the bulletin and keys, he put the rest in the fruit box and entered the hall, where the guard he'd seen before walked by, talking on a radio.

There was no sound but Allen's footfalls as he started up the middle stairway reading the bulletin, his hip sliding along the wooden banister to keep his balance. It was equally quiet on the third floor. Painted gunmetal grey, the long hallway smelled of wax and had six low-watt bulbs spaced evenly along the ceiling, each in a metal cage. Like a tunnel, dull light entered the dank corridor through a small window at each end.

He unlocked the third door on the right; his room was actually closer to the north stairs. Allen walked in, turned on the banks of fluorescent lights to see four off-yellow walls and standard classroom equipment. The long green chalkboard faced one-piece desks in five long rows. Made mostly of metal, each seat had a bin at the side with scratches and chips in the tan finish; the writing surfaces resembled scarred kitchen cutting boards with years of graffiti preserved in clear lacquer.

A solitary poster in the room listed the school rules on a bulletin board over the only long table. A black metal music stand near the teacher's desk apparently served as an ersatz podium. Above the chalkboard, rows of commercially made cards, faded from red to pink, presented the parts of speech: NOUN—THE NAME OF A PERSON, PLACE, THING, OR IDEA. VERB—ACTION . . .

He quickly checked out his scant supplies in the desk and cabinet, including a lifetime hoard of white hole-reinforcement stickers, stacks of worn texts, and primary-school handwriting books. He opened one of about thirty threadbare, dark-blue Webster's to the copyright page—the dictionary was pre-Sputnik.

Allen went over to one of four tall windows. *No jail wire up here.* Beneath his view of dingy grey skyline, the nearest building was also white brick and three stories, but not as long as Main. Between its first-floor windows, iron rails ran up concrete ramps to three cafeteria portals. Like at his schools, they probably sold sweet rolls, juice, milk, and hot chocolate there in the mornings. A courtyard about the size of a college gymnasium floor separated Main from the cafeteria—at each end, a red brick archway connected the two buildings. The only indication of recent physical improvement was new black asphalt.

Sitting in a lopsided swivel chair at his desk, he checked the schedule. After a long homeroom, the seven periods would be shortened all day. His second hour was free; Dorsey had called it *prep*. Allen stood at the board and printed GREENE. *Damn, the chalk's trembling.*

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He read his sketchy lesson plans before he checked the white-faced clock on the wall. Deciding to use his last minutes to take down the old grammar strips, he found a staple-puller, pushed a chair to the chalkboard and climbed up to begin working.

The bell rang as he ripped off the last of the brittle, dusty cards. Less than a minute later, some girls rushed into the room; they looked more like mid-teens than seventh-graders. "Can I help you?" He jumped down; they just sat and giggled as several more girls entered. Allen searched through the papers on his desk and found the homeroom list. *Thirty-one girls for Miss Greene—terrific.*

The tardy bell rang, followed by a buzz on the intercom. The girls stood and started to quiet down to face the flag and the black PA box next to it. While they waited, a few of them glared at Allen as if he were crashing a party.

He smiled sheepishly and pointed at the board. “My name’s Greene. There was apparently a mix-up with the paperwork—they thought I was a woman.” Most of the girls laughed right over the kids on the intercom who had started to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Every last girl was black, from one with pale skin and a short wheat-colored Afro, to another whose face was as lustrous and dark as obsidian. About a third of them wore trim natural hair; most of the rest had ponytails or permanent hairdos.

The laughter diminished as announcements began on the PA. Only a few girls looked like children; the rest were in makeup. Those with darker complexions wore light eye shadow while the fairer ones seemed to use black, blue, or purple. Most of the adolescent girls had on bright blouses; a few of them were in mini-skirts, and Allen told himself to keep his eyes up.

It took about fifteen minutes for attendance and to have them fill out school forms—the girls complied, just griping a little before he started to hand out their schedules. Denise, a tall girl with short natural brown hair and a dark pretty face, scowled at her card, and then paraphrased Maxwell Smart from TV. “Would y’all believe I got him *three* times?” Several others groaned about their classes, then most of the girls went on chatting or laughing.

Allen put his papers on the music stand, but it slid down to the bottom,

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causing more giggles. Denise pointed at him. “Name like that and bein’ so white, you ain’t no Mexican. You dye your hair black?”

He didn’t answer for a moment, caught off guard by the blunt question. “Uh, no, I had two swarthy grandparents.”

“They had what?”

“They were swarthy—dark.”

“Don’t be callin’ *me* that.”

“Okay, Denise.”

She nodded to the box on his desk. “You sellin’ apples, Mister Greene? Little *green* apples, like in that dumb song?” That started another bout of raucous laughter; Allen couldn’t help but smile, and he was surprised she had called him *Mister*.

When the girls began to settle into quiet conversations, he took a step toward Denise and the others nearby. “All ready for the new semester, girls?” They raised their brows or frowned, turning away. Still with ten minutes, he opened *The Martian Chronicles* at his desk. *Perfect for Allen the alien*.

Denise pointed at him again. “You readin’ a school book?”

“No, they’re stories.”

She turned to the nearest girl. “Must be dirty.”

He waited for the laughter. “Why do you say that, Denise?”

“You hidin’ it with that cover.”

“Oh. The stories aren’t dirty, I’m just private about what I read. If somebody asks, I usually tell them.”

“I ain’t askin’. But when I’m in your class period three, can I bring my own book from home an’ keep it covered?”

“Sure.”

“And do I gotta tell you what it is?”

“No, you don’t.”

“Okay then.”

Allen watched Denise turn back to her friends. *So far so good*. He scoffed to himself—it wasn’t girls who raised most of the hell in his junior high. The bell rang. “Okay, that’s it, you’ll probably have a female teacher tomorrow.”

“No more Mister Little Green Apples?” Denise’s remark prompted more laughter as most of them started to leave.

The handful of homeroom girls who stayed on spoke to those who entered

and had them laughing about Allen right away. *Firm but fair* on his mind, he left his desk to use the music stand. He pulled it up from the floor, but it slid right back down halfway. Amidst the snickers, he retreated to the front of his desk and leaned back on the edge.

His mouth completely dry again, Allen peeked at the class while he skimmed the list; only a few of them looked resentful—most just talked as they waited for the bell. Although the room was starting to fill up, this would be his second smallest group, twenty-seven on the roll, nearly even by gender.

The kids were much closer to his age than the teachers he had seen. In general, the boys seemed younger; more than half of them were pre-adolescents, dressed similarly to a skinny little guy up front in a holey Flintstones T-shirt tucked into loose blue jeans. Two of them could fit into a desk; his pant legs were somehow too short, not reaching the tops of the red socks in his ragged grey sneakers.

Of the other boys, a few of the taller ones looked like they already shaved. Some were in dark pants and synthetic gold or black shirts, those in gold sitting near others in gold, and black with black. *Damn, nobody mentioned any gang crap.* Allen had been exposed to two types of gangs, the Mexican *pandillas* that usually left him alone, and the so-called high-school service clubs—future frat boys, all white, who had rumbles after dark.

Many of the adolescent males wore thick Afros, but one big kid had flat processed hair, a conk job—Allen knew the term from a Richard Wright novel. That boy had planted himself by the window in the last row, his head on the back rest as if it were a pillow; he extended his long torso beneath the desk, his feet touching the seat ahead of him. He had hickory-brown skin and a black shirt with long collar flaps like crow's wings, touching the squared shoulders of his thin black windbreaker.

A darker boy next to him, also in black but not quite as brawny or tall, had a long comb protruding from his helmet-like Afro. They sneered at Allen, who pretended to check the roll. His peripheral vision picked up a paper wad sailing across the room; he saved his ire for something that mattered.

After the tardy bell, the class calmed right away, apparently curious. A couple of stragglers came in. Allen's tongue peeled from the inside of his mouth like a piece of masking tape. "That's your one freebie—tomorrow I turn in a tardy." He made a quick count—twenty-five students.

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“Are you going to call roll?” a very small girl asked from the front row in a cross tone; her English was more formal than the other kids he had heard. She was nearly as fair as a redhead, though she had dark eyes and brows, her auburn hair banded behind in a wiry ponytail. A puffy port-wine birthmark the diameter of a fifty-cent piece stood out on the light skin of her left cheek.

“A sign-in sheet is starting around. Print your name on it please, or you’re absent.” Most of the students turned to the first row.

The same small girl pointed at Allen. “How can you learn our names?” Her clothing was unique; she wore a long, prim, white dress, no ruffles, not quite as folksy as a prairie-schooner outfit.

“One at a time, I guess. What’s yours?”

She made a haughty smile. “Charmane Muhammad.”

A boy with a dark complexion and short natural hair jeered from near the back. An inch or two taller than the other pre-adolescents, he had some baby fat on his arms and neck. He wore a black T-shirt and jeans, probably to be like the two surly boys behind. “That ain’t your name, Charmane.” He tried to rhyme the last two words; several kids laughed.

She looked straight ahead. “Shut up, Marlon Brown.”

“All right, that’s enough. We have short periods today—let’s get going.” Allen directed their attention back to the board with his thumb. “My name is Greene with an *e*.”

Marlon’s face broke into a wide grin. “Green with a *e* looks like whitey to me.” While most of the class chuckled, the two boys behind Marlon ignored the fun, still glowering.

“Okay, as you know, this is Language Arts—”

“Dumbbell English.” Marlon raked his short Afro twice with a black comb.

“Boy, don’t you ever shut up?” Charmane still didn’t turn back to him.

Allen faced the middle of the class, between the two adversaries. “My answer for Marlon is that I don’t care about your previous academic record. What I do—”

“I don’t play no *ac-a-dem-ic* records, jus’ my brother, James Brown.” Marlon smugly slid the comb into his chest pocket. This time, the two tall boys smiled along with the general laughter.

Charmane faced the class. “The fool doesn’t even know the teacher’s talking about grades.” Mostly girls laughed at that.

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Marlon shrugged. "Least *I* know he's lyin' about it." The class stilled after the accusation, turning to Allen.

"Look, I was told your testing in sixth grade put you in this level. Well, that's old news as far as I'm concerned, and so are your grades from first semester—I haven't seen them, and I don't need to."

Marlon grinned again, poking himself in the chest. "I got a *D*, now you know one."

"A *D* for dummy." Charmane made a feisty grin.

"Yeah, you got a *C* for cracker."

Some boys laughed, then more joined in after the tall kid with the processed hair chortled to his buddy. Allen waited; he looked at Charmane, then Marlon. "All right, knock off the put-downs, both of you." Marlon scoffed; Charmane reddened in a slow burn. "My point is that today all of you start from scratch in here."

Allen turned from the mostly ambivalent faces; the list had stopped halfway down the first row at the desk of a boy with a shaved head. Besides his singular baldness, he was the only one of the smaller boys not dressed like a child. He wore dark pants, shiny shoes, and a shimmering gold shirt with its sleeves rolled up, showing prematurely developed muscles. A tall boy in a yellow shirt sat to one side of him, two more right behind.

"Would you pass on the sheet please?"

The boy looked up from staring at his desk. He had an oval sepia-brown face. "My pencil's busted."

The kid didn't seem to be playing around; Allen walked over to him. "Here, I forgot to put a pen with it." The boy printed his name and passed the pen and list back to his pal. "Your name please?"

"Ronnie Crawford, teach." He snuck a glimpse at Allen with lively but solemn dark eyes and thick brows.

"Okay, while the list is going around, I'll explain what you can expect to be doing in here."

Over some low griping, Marlon spoke right up. "You ever teach before?"

"No, Marlon, I'm new at it. Let's get—"

"Man, another one." Marlon rolled his eyes.

"Boy, why don't you shut the hell up and let the teacher talk?" Charmane fumed toward the ceiling.

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“Muslims ain’t supposed to swear—you shut up” He added a word partly under his breath; it sounded like *gimp*. Only a couple of boys laughed; Charmane covered a little.

Allen stiffened his posture and pointed emphatically. “Okay, that’s it for the put-downs, the swearing, *all* of it.” That opened some eyes. “Now, when you come in the room tomorrow, you start writing, you don’t wait for the bell.”

A few hands shot up and there was some grousing; Allen acted as if he didn’t hear a faint “bullshit” from the big boy with slick hair behind Marlon.

“Hold the questions just a minute. So what do you write every day? Whatever you want, and if that’s too open, I suggest a journal—what you did or observed since you last wrote. It’s up to you how personal it is. I’m the only one who will read it, unless you choose to share it.” There were more groans. “This is called informal writing, and you—” A hand went up. “Yes, Charmane.”

“Informal means not fancy, right?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Charmane the brain.” Marlon waited for the laughter. “Muslims ain’t supposed to kiss up to the man either.”

“You don’t know anything about Muslims,” Charmane replied in a matter-of-fact tone, still looking straight ahead.

Marlon just grunted, so Allen used the lull in the bickering. “Okay, this informal writing time is when you *don’t* worry about spelling, grammar, anything—you just write.”

Next to Charmane, one of several girls who could pass for sixteen or older raised a hand. Like some others, she had made an effort to dress nicely for the first day of school. Burly but not obese, her hair was coiffed into a stiff pageboy; she wore eye shadow matching a ruffled powder-blue blouse that didn’t completely veil her mature chest. Her mocha facial features, full but uniform, gave her an attractive mien, though she had mild acne problems.

Allen nodded. “And your name please?”

“Sandra Small. I want to ask—”

“They ain’t small at all.” Marlon’s face was sly but his voice audible. A nearby girl warned him, and a few boys winced as if he had crossed some line.

“You say somethin’, boy?” Brows raised and eyes ahead, Sandra was asking and daring him, but he didn’t answer. “Well?”

Marlon looked around helplessly. “Nuh-uh.”

“Didn’t think so.” She turned to Allen. “Don’t let that little boy bother you.” Extending her hand to Charmane, they casually slid open palms together, then Sandra faced him again. “Mister Greene, if you don’t fix our English, how we supposed to get better at it?”

Attempting not to show too much appreciation for her question, he walked closer; she had silver fingernails, as long as small penknives. “We’ll work hard on formal writing in here, Sandra, but to be fluent, you also need time to just write and not worry about rules.”

“You mean like speakin’ in French or Spanish?”

“Shit.” The muffled expletive from the same boy in back sounded like *she-yit*, but the class didn’t react.

“Yes, *fluent* can mean speaking another language well. If your writing is fluent, that means it can just flow, sort of like thinking.” Making a fluid motion with his arm, he faced the whole class. “So during that time, all I care about is that you write. By the way, when I explain something that isn’t clear, ask about it like Sandra did—it shows you’re learning.” He turned to be sure he didn’t embarrass her; she was grinning.

“Okay, for fluency writing, the work stays here in folders until mid-semester. Tomorrow, your file box will be the first one, right there.” He pointed to the long table under the bulletin board. “I also have some old pencils—so, no excuses—you start to work right away every day.”

Nearby, the only adolescent boy not in black or gold grumbled, “Sounds like Dorsey.”

Ronnie Crawford raised his hand tentatively.

“Yes, Ronnie?”

“How long do we get to write when we come in?” His voice was clear, and no scorn came from the class except for another jeer from the critic in the last row.

“Okay, another good question. You’ll have ten minutes, more if you’re early. Once you have a full paragraph, you can change to reading. Looking at pictures won’t count.”

“Haw! It’s good you said *that*, Mister Greene.” Sandra turned to Charmane. “These boys are *always* lookin’ at pictures—the same kind—*allayall* know what I mean.”

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Most of the girls laughed. “They *all* nasty, even them little boys,” a tall girl chimed in, starting the rest on a long laughing jag.

Allen waited, again trying not to smile; a few boys scowled or shook their heads. “Okay, let’s go on. For reading, I’ll have a shelf of books, and we’ll be going to the lib—”

“Bullshit.” The oath, loud this time, was followed by some *ooos* and mumbled comments from the kids. The boy behind Marlon stood; he was over six feet tall, his flattened wavy black hair reflected the lights overhead.

Allen clenched his jaw. “Your name?”

The boy ignored him and just moved slowly forward, his left hand holding something in the front pocket of his black pants. The class hushed; Ronnie and the other boys in gold glared at their rival, who stopped several feet from Allen, checking him out head to toe. “You ain’t no teacher, jus’ a fat hippie.” A few boys chuckled, including his sidekick, who was also walking to the teacher’s desk, his long comb handle sticking out of his Afro like an arrow in his head. He stopped to invite Marlon, who just kept looking down at his hands.

Allen pointed at the two boys. “I want you both to take your seats—now.” His voice was uneven; his neck throbbed.

“You gonna make us?” The taller boy moved much closer, his hand still in the pocket.

The class silently turned to Allen, who made his tongue moisten the roof of his mouth, then his lips. “If you already decided to act this way, I can’t *make* you do anything.”

His minion laughing behind, the boy’s fair handsome face formed a knowing grin. “*That* shit you got right.” He pointed at Sandra. “You think these bitches are funny? I got somethin’ funny for you, Greene.” With a cold chuckle, he slid his hand very slowly from the pocket, cupping it on his hip to hide whatever was underneath.

Allen glanced at the intercom, his pulse pounding. The boy looked down and began to move his fingers, everyone watching him. Like a time-lapse film of a blooming flower, the boy’s hand opened very slowly, revealing only the black fabric of his slacks. An exhale filled Allen’s cheeks, escaping in a rush.

A mirthless grin crossed the boy’s face before he shouted. “Hah! Scared a’ somethin’, teach?” He started to saunter away, touching a bulge below his windbreaker’s left pocket.

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The second boy snickered, walking past Allen. “You turnin’ green, Charlie Greene.” A three-inch white scar stood out on his dark chin. Not in any hurry, he followed his cohort toward the door.

The leader snarled at Sandra, then they both smirked with superiority toward the boys in gold. The two of them gradually strutted and cackled their way into the hallway, leaving the door wide open. Allen walked over to close it. *Okay, teach, a long quiet breath.*

Allen faced the class. Charmane and many of the others were just waiting— a few kids, including Sandra and Ronnie, stared at their desks. “Somebody want to tell me their names?”

Most turned away, but Sandra looked up at him. “It don’t matter. They came just to show how bad they think they are. They’ll just run off or get caught by the cops.”

Allen walked to the chalkboard. “I still have to report them.” He reached up and pushed the PA button.

Sandra was looking down again. “You do that, Mister Greene, but we ain’t gonna rat on nobody, not even them.”

He waited for Venable . . . nothing. There were a few chuckles for his ineffectual effort; he turned to the class. “Look, I admit he scared me—you guys got pretty quiet too. He had *something* in his jacket.”

The PA crackled. “Yes, office.” Regardless of the static, Venable’s tone was clear: *What the hell do you want?*

“Two boys just left—”

“They what? Can’t hear you.”

“Two boys left my room without permission!”

“I hear you now, Mister Greene.” That brought some titters from the class.

“I don’t have names—I didn’t finish attendance yet.”

“And the others won’t tell you, right? You might try taking roll at the beginning of the hour.” More kids laughed.

“One of them might’ve had a knife or something—they’re both wearing black.”

“That helps,” Venable said aside as if Allen couldn’t hear her. “All right, I’ll tell security.” The PA clicked.

The sign-in sheet had returned to the front; he picked it up from Sandra’s desk. She was looking right at him. “Mister Greene, I’m gonna say somethin’ the school already knows ’bout that fool. He’s been in trouble with guns, an’ I don’t mean no zip guns.” Sandra intrepidly squared her jaw. “I ain’t scared a’ him, jus’ not gonna be stupid about no guns.”

“Makes sense to me.” He cleared his throat. “Okay, there’s time for a short assignment.” A few kids began carping, but *Just get on with it* was on most of their faces. “Who needs paper or pencil?” After more groans, several students crowded up to the pencil sharpener while Allen hurried up and down the aisles with materials for some kids who had raised a hand.

He waited for the last pencil to grind. “All right, tell me about *you*, whatever you want. If you can’t think of anything, write it like an autobiography—you know, ‘I’m Joe—I was born in Cucamonga. I have two sisters and a cat named Fido—blah, blah.’ This writing is also private, unless you choose to share it. Okay, about eight minutes left.” Most of the class started to work; Allen began to compare boys’ names from the sign-in and class sheets, but some hands went up. He put the lists down and worked with the kids until the bell.

“Be sure your name’s on your paper, and leave it on the first desk in your row with my pencil, if you borrowed one.” Most of the kids were already on their feet. “See you tomorrow, be ready to write.”

Two of the smaller girls walked up to him, their faces serious. “Remember, Mister Greene,” one said, pointing to the papers at the front of her row, “nobody else gets to look at what we wrote in there.”

“Yes, girls, that’s right.” Like most of the others, they walked away talking about class schedules, not the incident with the boys. Allen picked up the two lists again; Ronnie was hanging around the front door by himself. Charmane, moving with a decided limp, hobbled toward that same door with Sandra.

They stopped, turned, and Sandra said, “Mister Greene?” Ronnie was behind them, but he left when he realized they were waiting for the teacher.

He approached the girls; Sandra removed a wallet from her small purse.

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After watching the last kid leave, Charmane turned to him. "I don't usually like English much, Mister Greene."

Allen was taking a peek at the lists in his hand; her statement didn't sink in right away. "Oh? What do you like to study, Charmane?"

"Math, and especially science, but sometimes they only let boys do the interesting stuff."

"That doesn't sound right."

Sandra handed him a snapshot. "See there, Mister Greene?" All the toughness was gone from her voice.

The trimmed Polaroid had to be a shot of her baby sister, all smiles in pink ruffles and ribbons. "Very cute, Sandra."

"That's my baby, Melissa." She beamed at the picture.

My God. "Uh, I can see why you're proud, she's a very pretty child. Right, Charmane?" He passed the photo to her.

"Yeah, I babysit her sometimes—she's the cutest." She gave the snapshot back to her friend.

"Ain't she?" Sandra carefully inserted it into a plastic sleeve. "I'll show you a better one of her tomorrow, Mister Greene." She put the wallet away; her affable demeanor morphed into a frown. "My mom usually has her when I'm at school. I ain't gonna quit, no matter what these fools say." She glared at the desks as if they were still occupied.

"Good for you, Sandra." He smiled. "I think you'll both do very well in this class. Don't be late now."

With big grins, the girls hurried away; Sandra turned to him. "We'll see you last period, Mister Greene."

Allen waved back, but seeing the lists in his hand broke his good mood. He hurried to his desk to reconcile the names, relieved that it was his free period. He finished, then got up and poked the PA button; Venable answered moments later.

"Mrs. Venable, the two boys who left, it's possible one of them had a gun."

"Names, Mister Greene?"

"Including those two, I marked three boys absent—Michael Bradley, Martin Lynch, and Rupert Washington."

"Michael and Rupert for sure—I'll tell security. Is that all of your absences? You didn't put your attendance out."

“Sorry, those three and Aisha Hall.” Venable was gone. He checked his long third-period class list; he would have to work on a tougher introduction. Allen went over to lock the door, then came back to the windows. Two boys ran frantically into the courtyard below, a guard only seconds behind them. He sighed and sat down in a student desk.

With his heels up on the iron steam-heat registers that ran along the wall beneath the windows, he was listening again: *chairs scraping—somebody whistling—buzzing fly—trash can lid—slamming door—breeze in the eaves.*

He finally opened his eyes, making a long exhale. Allen had relaxed enough that it took a few seconds to place exactly where he was. He stood, then gazed out through the smog at the silhouettes of distant signage, TV aerials, and roof crowns. He looked past the far end of the cafeteria at an old spindly eucalyptus with about ten picnic benches below in two rows. Outside the fence and across the street, a solitary wide palm, not the tall kind, survived in a front yard, some of its fronds brown and desiccated. *A tree grows in Watts.*

Allen faced his desk; the music stand had slipped down again, as if set up for a performance by a small child. He smiled about Sandra and Charmane, but how many more Michaels and Ruperts would he have? And there might be more smart-asses like Marlon with all his pejoratives—*gimp, cracker, and whitey.* A childhood ritual came to mind, avoiding sidewalk squares with *WPA* or other letters stamped into the concrete—step on one, you’d be slugged and called a “nigger baby.” He sighed, took out blank paper, and started a new introduction.

After a few minutes, he read his lecture. *What crap.* He stared beyond his desk and back into his high-school days. Adams High had a handful of black kids, one was a blind girl they treated like a mascot, and there was a guy who hung around with rich kids and ran for student council. Since Allen didn’t know him or his opponent, he wrote in *Alfred E. Neumann.*

His friends argued about whether the black guy was cool or uppity—Allen stayed out of it; he had his own racial baggage. After his parents died, he told Dan that his father’s people were Rom Gypsies from Vladivostok who had changed the family name to Greene after they fled to the United States. Dan laughed at him. “Big deal, mine were shanty Irish. You don’t have to hide it, nobody gives a damn, everybody in their own little world . . .”

Allen faced the desks as if they were occupied. “Okay, I’m the alien in

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charge of *this* world, and don't you guys forget it." He looked guiltily at the PA, then crumpled the introduction and tossed it. After he wrote a new lead-in, Allen added most of what he said before about the fluency writing, which made him curious about the assignment from first period. He took a few minutes to read their papers.

Four of them were blank, and about a third of the kids only scribbled a few choppy words. One boy didn't get Allen's joke or was being sarcastic. He wrote:

Im Joe born in kookamunga and got a dog name Fydo.

Several more had a lot of mistakes but in long sentences; Sandra's was one of those. She wrote about plans to take her baby to see Martin Luther King in L.A. Charmane wrote the most—factual, linear, and with nearly perfect grammar and punctuation. She was born in Chicago after four brothers; she didn't mention anything about her bad leg. Allen put Charmane's paper with Ronnie's on top of the pile. He quickly read Ronnie's again:

When I notice things, if I tell anyone except my uncle, they think I'm wierd. Like when I was walking to school today and saw this bird, a sparrow I think. It was flying real fast, but not like a plain that flys all steady. The bird was flying thru the air like a car moves.

Fast and then rest, fast and then rest. When somebody says there in a plain and flying like a bird it doesnt make sense because

Man, give him time to finish. He checked the clock, then revised his speech again. He practiced it once, then made a few more changes before he unlocked the door for period three. When the students began to come in, tall Denise from homeroom started them laughing right away about *little green apples*. He checked the list—thirty-six, only fourteen boys. If all the kids showed, they would be a desk short. Except for some homeroom girls, the faces were new, but their physical appearance was about the same as period one. "Okay, sit where you want, but sit."

When the tardy bell rang, there were a few empty seats in the room. To keep Venable off his back, he dispensed with the sign-in sheet to call the roll. Allen picked up his list and waited for them to quiet down; nobody came in

late. It took almost five minutes for him to say the names, crossly ignoring or staring down a few wisecracks.

With five absentees on the slip, he headed for the clip outside the door, talking at the same time. “As you see on the board, my name is Greene. Here’s the deal: wherever you sit tomorrow will be your assigned seat on my chart. If you decide to mess around there, you’ll get one warning, then I move you.”

Ignoring the gripes, he put out the slip and returned to his desk. He stood next to his outline, waiting until there was near silence. “Okay, when I’m teaching, I want and expect questions, but for the next few minutes—*no* questions.” He toned down his harsh voice. “I have a little secret for you.”

Most of them were listening; he glanced at his paper. “The best-paying job I ever had was for one-seventy-five an hour, delivering candy in L.A. Here’s the secret.” He tried to sound slightly incredulous. “They pay inexperienced people like me more than *four dollars an hour* for teaching you guys.”

He expected some remarks, but there were only a few murmurs. “So why did they give me this job? Because I finished high school and my English degree. I worked part-time in college and wasn’t the best student, but I made it. So this is the most money I ever made, and I intend to do my job.” *For now, anyway.* He ignored more grumbling.

“There’s *nobody* in here who can’t learn if you’re trying. I expect every one of you who wants to learn *will* learn. I think most of you want that—maybe a few don’t, for whatever reason. One reason I *won’t* accept is if you think you aren’t smart enough.”

Like a predictable response to a TV straight line, one boy blurted out that some other kid was stupid. Allen loured at the perpetrator, then turned to the poster. “I added a rule to this chart in marker—the first one.” He pointed to I-A - GOLDEN. “The golden rule in here goes like this: nobody says someone is stupid, a dummy, or makes *any* other sort of put-down. You don’t want to hear that about you, so you don’t say it about anybody else—period.”

Most of the kids were thinking; a few looked at him as if he were crazy—only two or three didn’t seem to be listening. “Finally, I won’t put up with anybody who disrupts your learning by breaking that rule or the other ones.” The room was silent.

“So what happens if one of you is goofing around in class? If I decide it’s harmless, and if you knock it off when I ask, then it counts as a freebie. If I

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think you're trying to be disruptive or mean, you get an actual warning—do it again, you get isolation here in the room. The last step before involving the school is me calling your parents. Any questions?”

There were sneers and a few low complaints; he was about to go on to fluency writing, but two hands went up. Allen called on a short boy up front in an oversized white T-shirt. The fairest and most overweight kid there, he seemed almost as round as he was tall. “What’s your name again, please?”

“Darrel.”

“The little white barrel,” said a lanky pre-adolescent boy sitting three rows back.

A few boys laughed; one girl said, “Mister Greene, Raymond sound awful mean to me.”

“Raymond, you heard what I just said about put-downs. That’s your warning. Do it again, and you go to isolation.”

The boy slouched, jeering unintelligibly; Allen marked his name and turned. “What was your question, Darrel?”

“You jus’ said it again. Ice-a-something—what’s that?”

Geez, he’s serious. “Isolation—your desk goes in a corner, and you do your work alone so you don’t bother anybody.”

“Oh.” His brows up, he looked impressed. “An’ after that, you’d go to all that trouble to go down an’ call my grandma?”

“I hope not, Darrel, but if you get a third warning, you can count on it.”

Some kids groused, but Darrel nodded gravely, then looked at the board. “How come you don’t put *Mister* with your name?”

“It doesn’t bother me to be called *Greene*.” He backed up and pointed to the rules. “It’s all in how you say it.”

Thick creases formed on Darrel’s forehead. “We can’t do that with other teachers.”

“Yes, well, neither can I.”

Denise, who hadn’t commented as she did in homeroom, finally put her hand up from the back row.

“Yes, Denise.”

“You said you wanted *us* to try. How long will *you* be trying—two days?”

Most of the class laughed; he waited. “I don’t know. They have me signed up until June—you think I can make it?” He grinned; she bristled and turned

away. “All right, I’m going to explain what you do every day when you come in. First . . .”

Their questions on the fluency writing were about the same as in period one, but no serious problems seemed to be brewing. He began the assignment, and only a few kids didn’t start to work, including Raymond, who sulked with his head down.

Static and then a voice came on the PA—nearly the whole class stopped writing. “. . . your attention. This is Mister Fogle—the following boys with schedule problems are to report to my office . . .” The kids waited more patiently than Allen did for the list to end; none of his boys were called. He got the class back to work, then picked up the roll and walked around the room, taking questions and trying to learn names.

Allen turned in his lesson plans to Dorsey at noon; she actually chuckled at his explanation of the homeroom mix-up. He skipped lunch, refined his intro and read more of the papers.

Halfway through period six as the kids were writing, it seemed that his last three classes had almost gone too well, as if they were daring him to implement his rules. Almost on cue, a girl got up and started to leave; he asked her to please sit back down, but she just said *Fuck you* in a see-you-later tone and took off. The kids laughed as he reported her to Venable, then they went on as if nothing had happened.

The bell rang to end the period. “Okay, be ready to write when you get here tomorrow.” He checked the list for his last class, Creative Writing—it would be his smallest group, only twenty-four, including Sandra, Charmane, Denise, Darrel, Ronnie, Michael and Rupert—the last two likely gone or kicked out.

He made a quiet sigh of relief; some girls came in and rushed immediately over to speak furtively to a few others who stayed on from period six. Charmane entered, limping quickly toward Allen’s desk. She was breathing hard, her slight frame practically hopping inside the yards of loose, plain clothing. “Mister Greene.” Brows furrowed, her voice was low but urgent; the red birthmark on her cheek seemed larger and darker than before.

“Charmane, what’s wrong?”

“Sandra won’t be here, she’s in trouble.”

“What happened?”

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“In P.E., she, um, sort of pushed a teacher.”

The tardy bell rang. “She did what?”

“It’s worse than that.” Her voice was even lower. “They had to take the teacher away in an ambulance.”

“My God. All right, let me get class started.”

5

As Charmane sat down, Allen took quick stock of his small class so he could get to Sandra's situation. Ronnie was there with one of his buddies in gold—just eighteen students in all, and many of them had already heard his new speech.

After he called roll and took the slip out to the hall, most of the kids sat sullenly through his shortened diatribe. “. . . and in this class, instead of fluency writing when you come in, you'll have a prompt for a short writing project.” He turned toward the board. “Here's today's: ‘You suddenly have all the power you need to change this school. What three things would you change and why?’”

He answered questions while handing out some paper and a few pencils. “Okay, get going—I'll be right at the door.” He nodded to Charmane and followed her out, keeping the door ajar.

Once out of view from the class, Charmane was in tears. “It wasn't her fault, Mister Greene.”

Allen pointed inside at a few talkers, then turned back to her. “Okay, tell me what happened.”

“I can only tell you some of it. Sandra, she, um, all of us were mad.” She paused to glare at a tall girl who walked by. As soon as the girl entered the next room, Charmane drew in a long snuffle. “That teacher, Hambone, she's crazy.”

“Hambone?”

“That's what she said.” Her tone had turned more defiant. “She's new and

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strict like you, but she's stupid—she didn't care that a lot of girls are in good clothes today, and she tried to make us do exercises!" Charmane was loud enough that some of the students looked up from their work.

"Okay, Charmane, try to take it easy."

"Yeah." She sighed. "So Sandra, it's her, uh, time—you know what I mean—and she's having a bad one. She tried to explain it to that bi—" Charmane composed herself with another sigh. "But she just told Sandra to get in with the rest of us." She paused again, angrily pursing her lips.

Two girls were talking in the room; Allen pointed at them. "Okay, go on."

"She told us to take off our shoes and line up for exercises. We complained but started to do it, except Sandra went back by the bleachers—the teacher yelled at her, but Sandra didn't move. So Hambone walks up to her and yells again, but this time Sandra curses her back like she deserved. Then that teacher makes a big mistake—she grabs Sandra's collar real hard, and pulls it. Sandra turns and just pushes her off, and the teacher trips over some wires for the bars and falls right on her face. First, we're all laughing, but then—" Charmane looked at Allen with a determined frown.

"This part's real important, Mister Greene. That teacher, she was moving around, her face still on the floor—no blood or nothing, but Sandra shows us this big red scratch on her neck. Then somebody, not Sandra, and I won't tell who, goes to beating on the teacher until she stops moving." Charmane turned away. "We didn't want to all get in trouble, so we pushed the call button and yelled to the office that a teacher was hurt."

He sighed. "Go on."

"After that, we almost had a fight because some of us said we'd tell part of what happened so Sandra didn't get blamed for the beating." Charmane glared at the tardy girl's room. "We were still arguing about it when a guard and Mister Godina got there. The teacher was moving around by then."

"No one's going to tell who did it, not even Sandra?"

"Nobody. That teacher only knows who pushed her. We'll tell *why* she got pushed, but that's all." The pleats in her brow deepened. "Me and those other girls could still get beat up just for saying this much." She looked down at her feet. "That's all I can say, Mister Greene."

"Will you tell it to the principal?"

"Only what I already said. It won't matter—they'll kick Sandra out."

"I don't see why, not after what you told me."

"They'll believe whatever that teacher says."

"We'll see about that."

She faced him again. "What can *you* do?"

"I don't know—whatever I can." He opened the door. "You can go on in and start your assignment."

"Can I do *fluency* instead? I got a lot to write about."

"Okay, do that, Charmane."

They walked in; some whispering girls went back to work. He hit the PA button, then walked toward a boy who had raised a hand.

"Office."

Glad that it was Miss Watson, he asked her to please tell an administrator that he had information on the P.E. incident. Allen circulated around the room, helping the kids, until someone knocked on the door a few minutes later. "Okay, keep writing. I'll be standing right there again."

He opened the door; an Asian woman glanced at him from across the hall and down one room. She peeked in through that portal, then started toward Allen. She was over five-six in heels, her business suit meticulous and cream-colored, like her complexion.

Still at his door, he saw Charmane talking and gesturing to Denise. Allen mimed "writing" to them with his pen. The woman, in her late thirties or early forties with medium-long black hair and dark eyes, approached; she was pretty but not attractive, like a mannequin.

Allen had known several Japanese-American kids since fifth grade when the city closed a school on the L.A. side of the tracks from Glendale and moved those mostly Mexican or Asian students to his elementary. In high school, he and his knot of friends got along fine with Japanese-American boys but were of the general opinion that the "Jap girls were stuck-up snobs." He once told his friends it wasn't true for the Nakamura twins, but when Damon said to name another girl, Allen admitted that he couldn't.

The woman stopped nearby and seemed to grin and grimace at once. "I am Mrs. Ishimoto, vice-principal."

He attempted a friendly tone. "Hi, Allen Greene." He was about to lift his arm to shake hands, but she was already pointing at his door.

"Please close it all the way, Mister Greene."

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Allen complied, then knocked on the glass portal so the kids knew he was still there. He watched them for a moment, then turned to the vice-principal.

“All right,” she said, “tell me what you know about the incident in the gym with Miss Hamblin.

“Yes, Charmane Muhammad came to me. She told me that the teacher . . .” He watched her reactions as he spoke. Even through the violent part, the vice-principal’s grin endured. “. . . so Charmane and some others argued about . . .” Allen checked the kids again. “. . . and then Mister Godina came in. That’s it, Sandra was defending herself.”

“And you really believe all that?”

What? “Charmane seems to be a very reliable kid. There’s no reason to think she’s lying.”

“I’m sure she *is* lying, Mister Greene.”

He made himself take a long breath. “I don’t agree. I think it’s admirable that she stands up so strongly for her friend.”

“I see. You seem to have some influence with the girl—you are obligated to ask her for the truth.”

“I already did. She made it very clear what she would and would not tell me.”

The vice-principal stepped forward, glared into the room, then faced him again. “What is she writing?”

“She’s working on a journal. Why?”

“I might get the information I need from there.”

“I can’t let you do that—it’s private.”

“Is that right?” She sounded scornful and sarcastic at once. “Well, I don’t have time to make that an issue.” Her grin became a smirk. “I’ll find out soon enough who those girls were, and what Sandra did.”

“I hope you do find them, but I’m sure you’ll also find out that Sandra was defending herself.”

“You’re something, Mister Greene, an expert after one day.”

“No, not at all, I just—”

“Please send Charmane out. I’ll wait.”

Shit. He walked in, came to Charmane’s desk and whispered to her. “The vice-principal is waiting to talk to you.”

“Mister Godina?”

“The other one, uh, Mrs. Isha—”

“Ishimoto.” She practically spat the name. “I won’t talk to her.”

“But you said—”

She gritted her teeth. “Mister Godina or Mister Schultz, not that bitch.”

Some nearby kids chortled. “Charmane, you can’t—”

“I know. Sorry, I won’t swear anymore.” Her little nub of a chin lowered into a pout. “I hate her.”

“Okay, take it easy. Just tell her you want to talk to someone else.”

“I don’t want any trouble, Mister Greene, but I won’t talk to her at all.”

“All right, I’ll go out with you.” Allen turned to the class. “Okay, everybody back to your writing.” He walked into the hall with Charmane, who brought along her things.

Ishimoto no longer had the pseudo-smile pasted on her face. “I don’t have all day, Mister Greene.”

“Charmane would like to talk to Mister Schultz.”

The vice-principal peered condescendingly down at the small girl’s plain apparel. “Fine, come with me.” Ishimoto resurrected the grin and walked off briskly, her high heels reporting on the slick floor like steady muffled gunshots. Charmane followed her and turned back to Allen, glumly circling her crown with a forefinger, then pointing at Ishimoto.

Yeah, but how much pull does she have? He hurried back into the room. “Good, it looks like most of you were writing—sorry I couldn’t help more. We still have a few minutes. Keep going, or read what you’ve written.”

He had difficulty concentrating on a few questions from the kids before the bell. “Okay, see you tomorrow.” After their end-of-day mad dash, he exhaled deeply as the last student left. Static began on the PA, then Venable announced that new teachers were to meet with Schultz in the morning. He quickly collected all the papers, intending to go right downstairs to find the principal.

Venable came on again, shouting over some racket in the background. “. . . a change for tomorrow. The meeting for new teachers is postponed. Instead, the entire faculty will meet in the cafeteria before school about today’s incident in girls’ P.E. If you have any new information related to that, let me know, and I’ll get you in to see Mister Schultz before you leave. Also, don’t forget to turn in your . . .”

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Allen hit the intercom button as soon as Venable finished. She came on right away. “What is it, Mister Greene?”

“I have information on the P.E. incident.”

“Stay there.”

Yeah, boss. He waited for at least a minute, staring at the first day’s accumulation of student writing.

“Mister Greene?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Mrs. Ishimoto said they already have your information.”

“Wait—” The PA clicked. Allen started to go down there anyway, but he stopped—they probably wouldn’t talk to him after he pissed off Ishimoto. *At the meeting, then. Great.*

He walked to a window and watched three elbow-to-elbow middle-aged white female teachers quickly cross the courtyard, two in suits, one in a dress, looking around warily as they chatted. Allen tried to study their faces. Were Ishimoto, Venable and the interviewers an accurate sample of the staff, or were there more like Dorsey?

Back at his desk, he started on the first paper from Creative Writing. Denise wrote that she would change all the P.E. teachers into frogs. He finished all but two of the rest; their writing wasn’t much better than his regular classes—from very good to nothing at all.

Allen had kept Charmane and Ronnie’s papers for last. He read hers, a half-finished account of the P.E. incident in angry, precise detail—no new names, as expected. Ronnie gave plausible reasons why the school needed a vegetable garden, aquariums, and a bird pen on the roof to raise pigeons. Allen clipped on a cover sheet, then corrected papers for another hour and a half.



He got home at dusk. Unexpectedly, Trudy’s ’56 “Ladybug” was parked in the driveway. Rick had refurbished the VW before they were married, then he gave it a coat of red paint and added round black spots. Trudy didn’t have the heart then to tell him that he overdid it.

Walking in the front door, Allen smelled chicken frying but didn’t see Trudy. He put his holey box on the dining-room table, trying not to bother

Pedro's slumber. The toilet flushed, then his very round sister wobbled in from the hall in a plain white peasant blouse that served well as maternity wear.

Trudy was about five-seven like their mom but with the paternal black hair that she usually kept straight and in a ponytail. She had the same fair skin and black eyes as Allen, but not his bulbous nose or dimpled chin. Her pregnancy somehow didn't betray the good looks and slender symmetrical features she had inherited from their mother.

"You been here a while?" He nodded to the kitchen.

"I was sick again. I'm finished with that crappy job."

"Good, about time. Why don't you take it easy, I know how to fry a chicken."

"Thanks, but I need to keep moving as much as I can." She started for the kitchen. "Hang on, Allen, I want to hear everything about today. You look like you could use a beer."

"Sure could, thanks."

She turned the chicken, then came back with a bottle and sat across from him with an eager smile and a glass of water. She laughed at his fruit box. "Nice briefcase, Bear."

He grinned. "It's just right, Turd-ee."

"Haven't heard that one for a while. Are you going to tell me about your first day or not?"

"Sure, if you want." He took a slug of beer. "When did Rick say he's coming?"

"He's working a little late."

"Bull, his truck was at Bill's, or I would've stopped."

"I don't want to talk about him."

Allen started on a general rundown of his day, stopping for questions and for Trudy to turn the chicken. He told her some details about the homeroom mix-up, the first-period incident, the kids' writing, and especially the situation with Sandra.

She shook her head. "That's awful, what will you do?"

"Try to speak up for her, I guess."

"You damn well better." She smiled. "I thought you'd go back—if you make it to Friday, Rick has to fork over ten bucks."

"Good, I could use some extra incentive."

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Trudy walked away, turned off the stove, then returned. “I know it’s only one day, but how are you feeling about the whole idea of teaching?”

“It happened so fast—one minute scared of the kids, the next minute impressed by them, and then pissed off by that vice-principal.” He scoffed a little. “It was pretty intense—seems like the sort of thing *you* always wanted to do.”

Sitting down a chair closer to him, she sighed. “Yeah, let’s not start on that. I’ve got to live with my decisions.”

“Whatever you say, but he’s lying to you again. God knows what else he’s doing.”

“He’s making enough money to pay for the baby and for me not to work for a while.”

“Three cheers, how long since he slugged you?”

“Don’t exaggerate, Allen. He hasn’t touched me since I started showing.”

“Big deal, being a father won’t change him.”

“That’s my problem.”

“Okay, but I’m going to look for an apartment soon, whether I stick with this job or not.”

“Maybe that is for the best, but this is still your house too. I have some money saved—I can help you.”

“No thanks.” He drained the rest of the beer, picked up his box, and turned to Pedro. “Still asleep.”

“That little stinker has been good company.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you later. I’m going to the library.”

“What about dinner?”

He headed for the back door. “Rick won’t miss his meal, and I don’t feel like listening to his BS tonight.”

“Allen, if you do move, you’ll still see me, won’t you?”

“Of course, but not here if I can help it.”

6

Not long after the dawn of what was to be his second day of teaching, Allen left home even earlier, again avoiding Rick. Some lights were on in back rooms of the tidy stuccos and frame ramblers in Los Feliz. In one yard, a man in a cardigan polished his antique Model-A Ford; bottles clanked from a block away—a milk-truck driver on rounds. Empty cloth saddlebags on his handlebars, a newspaper boy coasted up a driveway, hopped off, and let his bike fall. An old lady in overalls planted flowers in her small perfect yard. A Japanese gardener, the father of boys Allen knew in school, was edging the lawn of a large home that always looked out of place on the block.

Life in Happy Ranch. His nickname for Los Feliz reminded him of some local history he dug up for a social studies report in high school. The neighborhood's unofficial boundary was up in the Hollywood Hills, but most locals who lived below on what was once a Paleocene flood plain said Los Feliz began at the main entrance to Griffith Park, Allen's childhood stomping grounds. More like a small mountain range, the park was named for its benefactor, a land baron with the redundant name of Griffith Griffith, who was also known for serving only two years in San Quentin after shooting his wife in an alcoholic rage.

To Allen and his fellow urchins, the park was endless miles of sylvan playground and the setting for many of their favorite science-fiction movies. Los Feliz kids were fascinated when suction-cup-fingered aliens from *War of the Worlds* and atomic-mutated ants from *Them* died in the L.A. River near the park. Dan always said it was the smog that got them.

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He rolled down his window, listening to the radio: “Yes, warmer today, *Angelinos*—again tomorrow, then a perfect weekend to be outside.”

And forget all that crap in the air. His Volvo sputtered as he crossed into the next sleepy block, bringing to mind one of Trudy’s wisecracks: *We live between Sodom and Jerusalem—Hollywood and Glendale—where the libertines meet the Daughters of the American Revolution.*

Trudy sometimes pronounced *Los Feliz* in Spanish to piss off locals, who always pronounced it *Loss-FEEL-us*. The original land grant owners named it *Rancho Los Feliz*—Ranch of the Feliz Family. More loosely derived, it could be *Ranch of the Happy Ones*, or *Happy Ranch*—an eternal taunt to the erratic life of Griffith Griffith.

Allen passed some small businesses on Los Feliz Boulevard and crossed over the same concrete sewers—the L.A. River—where the giant movie-ants nested. He approached the Golden State Freeway, where long-ago clandestine raids by Allen and Dan on survey markers in *their* park failed to sabotage the construction of Interstate 5.

In those days, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry were always nearby on their spangled saddles, crooning to the movie cameras not far from Griffith Park. The black celebrities were all buffoons—Buckwheat, Rochester, Amos and Andy. Until later, anyway, when Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays entered their lives.

Allen drove up the freeway ramp, releasing a deep breath that finished as a sigh. How many of his fellow *aliens* would be giving Sandra a fair shake that morning?



About twenty minutes later, he approached the same rundown grocery on the arterial to Marshall. A polished black '61 or '62 Olds with half-moon chrome hubcaps was parked by the building in the shade, the silhouettes of four guys inside, the driver's Afro touching the headliner. Their heads turned, following Allen like the man on the stoop did the day before.

It was 6:35, nearly an hour before his required starting time, when he looked through the school's front door at the empty foyer. About to pound on the door, he put his coffee down and accidentally dropped all the cardboard he was carrying.

"May I help?" someone asked from behind. He turned and recognized her right away, the tiny redheaded woman from the interview panel, the only one besides Godina who hadn't scowled at him. She handed him one of his fallen flat boxes.

"Thanks. Allen Greene, from the interviews." She was at least sixty, though her pale unwrinkled face seemed youthful enough to get away with the crimson lipstick she used. With a broad smile, she shook his hand, bending her head back as if he were seven feet tall, not six-two.

"*Oui, bonjour*, I'm Monique Morgan." She helped him gather the cardboard. "We're neighbors, and in the same department."

"Thanks for the help." After they finished, she hefted her huge straw purse, bulging with books and materials and covered with bright red and orange paper flowers.

As he fitted all the boxes under one arm again, she made a playful smile. "I saw you yesterday, Allen, but you didn't see *me*."

"Oh? Sorry, I had a pretty full day."

"Yes, I know." She slung the heavy purse with difficulty onto her shoulder, then gave him his cup, a wad of keys jangling in her hand. "You're lucky I'm early." She unlocked and pulled open the door, her brocaded silver-streaked orange hair a foot below him as he entered first. As they walked, she looked up and smiled. "So how are you doing after all your trials?"

"Okay, I guess." He glanced at the dark office. "Didn't get off to a very good start with Mrs. Venable—we also had a little mix-up." He explained about the girls' homeroom as they approached the middle stairway.

"They'll straighten it out in a day or two." She chuckled. "Mrs. Venable pretends to be a crosspatch, but our secretaries hold this place together. I tell new people to focus on what she does, not how she sounds." They started up the stairs at her casual pace. Between the lapels of her brown business suit, a stunning turquoise and silver necklace hung down over her well-supported heavy breasts.

Good God, don't look there again. "So you heard about the excitement we had in first period?"

"A little. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Sure." He gave her a quick summation, finishing as they started up the third flight.

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“I think you handled it well for your first time.”

“Didn’t seem like it. If you don’t mind me asking, how often do you deal with something like that?”

She grinned. “Well, the ol’ red widow has some tricks up her sleeve, but in a good month things don’t get that difficult for me more than once or twice.”

“How do you handle it?”

“It nearly always plays out like it did for you—they just leave. If not, and no help comes, I just do what I can to keep anyone from getting hurt, including myself.”

They came to the third floor and started down the hall; he shifted the boxes to his other arm. “Have you ever been hurt?”

“Some of my students are quite protective of their doddering old teacher. I’ve been pushed down a couple of times over the years—no permanent damage.”

“Glad to hear that.” They stopped outside of Allen’s room; he leaned all the cardboard against the wall. “What have you heard about the incident in P.E. yesterday?”

She let her purse down to the floor. “Charmane Muhammad is in my homeroom—she came to me after school with the whole dreadful story. You seem to be in the middle of it.”

“Yeah, do you agree that Sandra was defending herself?”

“Absolutely, but she’s in a rough spot. I don’t know her very well, but it doesn’t hurt that she’s friends with Charmane, such a wonderful girl” Monique went on to say that she knew Charmane’s brothers and thought very highly of the family. “Greg, uh, Mister Schultz, will try to be fair, but he’ll get heat from all directions.”

“I haven’t even seen the man yet. I sure didn’t think much of Mrs. Ishimoto’s attitude.”

She frowned, it seemed to age her face. “Did you know that some L.A. hysterics believed that the Japanese were using the Watts Towers to spy on the U.S. during the war?”

He chuckled at her strange question. “You’re kidding.”

“No, it was a similar mentality that sent Japanese-Americans to the internment camps, including Mrs. Ishimoto’s family. Unlike many others who suffered that injustice, she developed a cold shoulder for those she considers

to be beneath her—I once told her as much to her face. I think it would be best for you to avoid our charming vice-principal as much as possible.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” He took out his keys.

She pointed at Allen’s stack of cardboard. “So what are all the file boxes for?”

“One for each class—journals.”

She strained to lift her purse again. “Good idea, let me know how it works out.”

He nodded, watching her move toward the room across the hall. “You weren’t kidding, you really *are* my neighbor.”

She took out her keys again. “Yes, *amour*.”

Amour? Geez.

“Allen, would you mind if I tagged along with you to our meeting?”

“Not at all. I’ll meet you out here—about when?”

“Seven-twenty?”

“Okay, see you then.” Allen tossed the cardboard into his room, then ran back down to the car for his teaching box. He left the school’s front door ajar so he was sure to get back in.

By seven fifteen, he finished assembling the six file boxes. Allen grabbed his lesson plans, hoping to review them during the meeting. There were a few teachers in the corridor, most walking toward the middle stairwell as Monique left her room. She carried what seemed to be a home-kilned white coffee cup, yellow wildflowers on the sides. He smiled at her.

“All set, *chéri*?” She headed him toward the north stairs, avoiding most of the teachers.

“Monique, do you expect anyone will speak up for Sandra?”

“Mrs. Berg, the girls’ counselor, and maybe yours truly—perhaps a couple of others. Are you going to?”

“Probably, but why would anyone listen to me?”

“Some won’t, some will.”

As they started downstairs, he asked Monique about her teaching assignment. She had been an art teacher for years until reassigned to Harding for budget reasons. She was allowed one period of art but had to teach eighth-grade English and take over the only foreign-language class. “You see, the previous principal overheard me say *oui-oui* on the way to the restroom, and that qualified me to be the French teacher.”

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His face was blank momentarily before he laughed a bit.

“Sorry, I’m notorious for bad puns. The actual reasons weren’t much better—they decided someone with my name and a college French class in 1931 was just who they needed.”

They came down to the first floor and walked into the north archway by themselves, then started across the courtyard. She shaded her fair complexion with some papers she had in her other hand. Allen squinted at the opaque sun just above the third story of the cafeteria. He pointed at the building. “What else is in there?”

“You haven’t been in Harding Hall? That’s the official name, though hardly anyone uses it. It’s mostly classrooms on the second and third floors—there are offices behind the kitchen for the cook, nurse, and security guards.”

“How many guards?”

“Two, we share one with Grant. I suggest you get to know them soon.”

“Right.” They came across to the south archway, where several teachers were walking by. Allen moved ahead of Monique, pulled open the cafeteria door, and followed her in.

The walls inside had scars and pocks, poorly disguised by slathered layers of the same off-yellow paint as in his room. Tall windows protected by the ubiquitous green steel grating looked out both sides of the cafeteria to a red brick auditorium on the left, the courtyard and Main on the right. Three cooks in light-blue uniforms scurried around a crusty-looking paneled kitchen and serving line at the far end of the hall. The old cafeteria had one saving grace—warm molecules of pungent cinnamon wafted into Allen’s nostrils from baking sweet rolls.

There were two dozen or so long folding tables on wheels, two of them placed between the three outside portals—milk crates, plastic utensils, and napkins on top. About ten tables were set up nearby, where at least thirty pattering teachers milled around a tall coffee pot and a huge tray of rolls.

More of the faculty streamed in from the stairs and doors. The majority of both sexes were in business attire, just a few men in casual work pants and print shirts. A handful of women sported slacks or short skirts; two wore “granny” dresses.

The teachers were almost all white and about evenly split by gender. Perhaps a dozen seemed to fit in Monique’s almost-retired category; most of

the rest were middle-aged. With the exception of a few individuals in their twenties and a like number of black teachers, the staff resembled the irritable, stodgy faculty at Allen's junior high.

Miss Dorsey sat at the far end of a table where Monique seemed to be leading him. Ishimoto was standing up front with Godina near some chairs set up behind a microphone. At the interview, Allen had pegged the chunky Godina as a middle-class descendant of Mexican immigrants. In his tight suit, the middle-aged vice-principal was about five-six with medium-brown skin, dark brows, short black hair, and a patch of moustache. Since Charmane seemed to be okay with Godina, maybe there was a chance he would support Sandra.

Monique tugged Allen's arm. "How about a sweet roll?"

Sure, Chubs could scarf a few. "No thanks."

She sipped from her cup and sighed. "Well, I guess you should officially meet our department chair." She led him to the near end of Dorsey's table and the pasty-skinned man who had read aloud one of Allen's interview questions as if he were disgusted.

The department chairman began to stand up. In his fifties and about five-nine with a steady cross mien to his round face, he had thin buff-brown hair—the end of a beige necktie stuck out from his tan suit because the slacks were cinched below his protruding paunch. He had a long, quarter-inch silver chain attached to his dark belt, fastened at its other end to a sturdy briefcase; his keys were snug to his gut on one of those retractable metal gizmos the size of a makeup compact.

The man gave Monique a patronizing smile after his eyes had lingered for a moment on her chest. "Good morning, Mrs. Morgan."

"Morning, Simon, uh, Mister Nash." She sounded cordial but distant. "Remember Allen Greene from the interviews?"

"Yes." Nash raised his arm doubtfully. "Mister Greene."

He shook the man's limp hand, making an effort not to be unfriendly. "Good morning." Allen sat on the other side of Monique, away from Nash. At the end of the table, Dorsey wore the same brooch on a different drab suit and chatted with a sober-faced black man in his mid thirties. About to sit down, he was an inch or two taller than Allen, just as heavy, but more muscular; he kept his neat Afro about an inch thick. Wearing slightly worn jeans and a

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blue denim shirt, he had the proletariat look down pat. Dorsey paused mid-sentence and turned Allen's way; he smiled at her. She just raised a brow to him, then went on talking.

"It shouldn't take long to expel this delinquent," Nash was saying to Monique, intentionally loud enough for anyone within ten feet to hear.

She sighed. "No, Simon, there are extenuating circumstances."

Nash took another furtive peek at her chest. "Not according to *my* information."

Acting as if he didn't hear Nash's snide remark, Allen opened his lesson plans and glowered at them, not able to read a word.

A stately, urbane-looking man in a grey suit joined the vice-principals at the head of the meeting. About six-four with a medium build, he was an impressive figure, but the principal was definitely showing his age. Below a full wave of white hair, his features, probably sharply Germanic at one time, drooped like a basset hound.

Schultz spoke to Ishimoto, her outwardly sanguine demeanor on display. Godina just listened, then the vice-principals sat together. She crossed her legs properly, the toe of one patent-leather high-heeled shoe arrogantly tapping the air. More of the faculty filed in, some leaning on the windowsills instead of sitting down. A grey-haired man with a sweet roll, math book and slide rule sat between Allen and Dorsey.

The principal came to the mike. "Okay, we don't have much time." Somber but patient, he waited for his garrulous audience. They finally took the clue; the jabber diminished. A middle-aged man and woman scurried together to Allen's table.

A few more late teachers entered; Schultz didn't even look at them. "Thank you, just the one topic today. If you have other items, please save them for our regular meeting tomorrow." He let that sink in for a moment.

"First, in case you didn't know, Miss Hamblin was released from the hospital with no permanent injuries." He waited for some low griping to peter out. "After I heard her side of the story, she was informed that her services are no longer required. I gave her the option of a hearing—she declined. I'll briefly share with you now what I believe are the facts of the incident. After the bell, Miss Hamblin . . ."

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Allen heard only minor deviations from Charmane's story.

"... girls who assaulted her, May Jones and Idajeane Whitley, are expelled and now in juvenile hall." A satisfied mumble rose from the audience, followed by some applause; Ishimoto gloated to Godina. A tall, blond middle-aged man in sweat clothes came over from a nearby table to shake Ishimoto's hand. The coach's exuberance caused his whistle to swing over and knock the side of her head; she chafed slightly through her pliable smile.

Monique whispered to Allen. "Van Burton, P.E. chair."

He nodded. *Got their pound of flesh—maybe that will help.*

Schultz glared at the mike, then looked up. "The punishment for those girls was pretty clear, but it's not so obvious for Sandra Small." He lowered his eyes. "She won't say she's sorry in so many words—only this: 'I should've just pulled her off my neck. My mistake was pushing her away.'"

He waited again for some grumbling from the audience. "Okay, I heard several strong opinions yesterday and this morning. Many of you believe Sandra's actions were very serious, others consider them mostly justified—I haven't heard much middle ground. He glanced at the two vice-principals. "We have a difference of opinion on whether she should be suspended for ten days or expelled."

Expelled?

The principal stopped talking when a man in a tweed sport coat, apparently a guard, entered holding a walkie-talkie. He went to Schultz and spoke, covering his mouth with a hand.

Monique whispered again. "Are you okay, Allen?"

"No." He watched Ishimoto join Schultz and the guard, who then walked away amidst loud gab from the teachers, their tone now more anxious than accusative.

Ishimoto sat again; Schultz faced the staff. "Nothing to be alarmed about, just a squabble outside."

The grandfatherly principal waited yet again for the grousing to die down. A male teacher at the table behind Allen said, "Means they didn't need an ambulance."

"Back to Sandra." Schultz sounded more forceful. "This is ultimately my decision and I'm leaning one direction, but I want to hear more of your input. I'll take a few more opinions, especially if I have yet to hear from you. I'm also open to any new information, if there is any."

On the other side of Monique, Nash stood up, the chain to his grey briefcase not quite taut. "I would like to respond."

Schultz glimpsed the yellow ceiling, keeping himself from rolling his eyes. "Mister Nash, your opinion on this is already very clear to me."

"As Alliance president, it is my duty to represent our membership."

"Please make it brief."

"From what I have heard, I believe my opinion reflects the overwhelming majority here. To put it plainly, we cannot give the impression that we have *any* tolerance for violence perpetrated against staff. If this child is allowed to return after only two weeks, it sends the message that she got away with striking a teacher. She must be permanently expelled by the school, and she will ultimately face God's judgment for her behavior."

Sitting down smugly, Nash nodded to loud applause and favorable remarks. Three tables away, a lanky older woman in slacks and a long-sleeve shirt raised her long arm. Monique smiled to Allen and said, "Sharon Berg."

Schultz nodded. "I've also heard from you, Mrs. Berg, but it's only fair for you to respond. Please go ahead."

"Thank you." She stayed seated, stroked her short boyish brown hair once, then turned to Nash. "This *child*, as you call her, gave birth to her own child last July, and if she is going to face judgment from God, Mister Nash, so will you." Ignoring a few gasps, Mrs. Berg turned to the principal. "I want it made very clear that against all odds, Sandra has managed admirably to take some control of her life. Since September, her behavior has been just fine, and she has formed new friendships here with positive role models like Charmane Muhammad and . . ."

The guy who made the ambulance remark mumbled, "Muslim."

Berg was concluding her remarks. ". . . I hope you consider those facts when—"

"Your comments are irrelevant, Mrs. Berg." Nash was back on his feet. "Her personal situation is no excuse for striking a teacher. Most of us would never tolerate such behavior, and we cannot allow permissiveness and the resulting savagery to take over this school and undermine what we have accomplished."

Strong applause followed again. One lady shouted, "That's right!" The same smart aleck at the next table said something about *Simon's briefcase*,

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which brought gales of laughter from the teachers around him. Monique cringed to Allen.

Nash was still standing. "And I might add that—"

"You have had your say, Mister Nash." Schultz faced the counselor. "Mrs. Berg, did you finish?"

"Not quite. Mister Nash has now exaggerated twice. *Striking* someone is not the same as a push. That's all I have to say." A middle-aged man in a summer suit sitting across from Mrs. Berg made a show of reproachfully shaking his head toward her.

"Who's that guy, Monique?" Allen asked quietly.

"Fogle, boys' counselor."

His mouth close to the mike, Schultz sighed. "All right, are there any comments or opinions I have *not* heard before?"

The teachers looked around at each other. Monique nodded to Allen encouragingly. He stood slowly; many in the audience turned his way.

Schultz started to address him. "Mister, um . . ." The principal leaned over to Godina.

Allen had a strange sensation that he was removed somehow, watching himself. Mrs. Berg's slender mouth was open in apparent surprise, but she looked at him hopefully.

Schultz turned, clearing his throat. "Mister Greene, my apologies to you and all eight of our new teachers." He sighed again. "Well, seven now—we will meet soon. Go on, please."

Allen had to release his dry tongue with some spit. "I, uh, don't agree with Mister Nash on at least two other points."

Nash chortled. "I only made one point." Titters from the faculty followed his comment.

"Actually, I think you made three or four." Some teachers by the windows had stopped chatting to face Allen. "You said there should be no tolerance for staff being assaulted, which I'm sure we all agree with, but you also assumed Sandra was part of the assault and had no right to defend herself."

"Ridiculous." Nash started to get up again.

Schultz glared at him. "Mister Greene has the floor."

Dorsey, expressionless, watched Allen; he turned to Schultz. "It seems to me those other girls are being justly punished, but Sandra's situation is much

different. It was Sandra who was acting in self-defense—the P.E. teacher apparently manhandled her for disobeying an unreasonable order. The teacher incited this, which I assume is why you dismissed her.” The crowd began grousing again; both Nash and Van Burton jumped to their feet.

“Quiet please.” Schultz was louder than before. He faced Allen. “Did you finish, Mister Greene?”

“Almost. Mister Nash also said that Sandra’s personal life and her progress were irrelevant—I think they *are* relevant. She seems to take her parental responsibilities very seriously, and she’s already shown me that she cares about her education.” Allen saw another smile from Mrs. Berg; Monique patted him on the arm. He sat to very scattered applause, then the long room was momentarily silent as two cooks hauled a large metal vat toward the portals—another worker followed with a tall cart of steaming sweet rolls.

“Mister Schultz.” A thin woman of average height stood up just a table away.

“Librarian,” Monique whispered. In a charcoal suit, the woman’s brown hair was in a tight bun; she wore little or no makeup behind black-rimmed glasses on a thin chain. Not even middle-aged, she looked very pleased with her prematurely achieved matronly script.

“Mrs. Anders.” Schultz sounded polite, but his blank face said that he’d rather pass on her comment.

“Our newer faculty,” she paused as if *faculty* were an overstatement, “are not aware of prior anti-social behavior of students such as Sandra Small. It isn’t appropriate for me to mention her previous offenses now. It is sufficient to say that before she came here, Sandra Small repeated sixth grade for *good* reason.” Her emphatic finish brought supportive applause.

Schultz’s face was somewhere between a stare and a glare. “Has she had any serious trouble with you, Mrs. Anders?”

The librarian was momentarily dumbstruck. “Um, well, nothing serious I can recall right now, but Sandra does not show proper respect. I am sure that other teachers have had—”

“Okay, I’m not aware of any major scrapes for Sandra this year. Anyone have conflicting information on that?” Schultz paused; Miss Dorsey’s burly friend grinned to himself.

Nash stood so fast that his chain caught on the corner of the table,

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yanking his briefcase. “First, a novice teacher’s bad judgment is not the issue, and it doesn’t matter if the child’s behavior has improved.” He was practically shouting. “This latest incident, *pushing* a teacher to the floor,” he snarled at Mrs. Berg, “supersedes everything. She must be expelled.” He took his seat, again to loud support.

Monique stood up slowly. “Mister Schultz.”

The principal’s face seemed to relax a little. “Mrs. Morgan.”

“Yes, I taught my two daughters to resist abuse, and I’m sure that those on our staff who have children did likewise. Why would we expect less from our students?” She paused. “Sandra defended herself from that woman, and then did not join the assault—she should not be suspended at *all*.” Monique sat to groans and faint applause. Allen patted her on the back; Nash gave her a sour look.

“Thank you,” Schultz said, “though I must tell you I am not considering the option of no punishment. Anyone else?” Two teachers stood just as the cooks unlocked the portals to some students in line. Both teachers sat back down, and many others watched the portals uneasily.

“All right, I think all viewpoints have had their say. We only have fifteen minutes before the first bell. I’m going to give you my deci—”

Van Burton was halfway to his feet. “We should vote.”

“As I said, this decision is up to me, and I am no longer hearing anything new.”

Nash stood again. “I agree with Mister Van Burton. We should have a vote so you can see how strongly we are united on this issue.” This time, the support for Nash was not as loud.

Mrs. Anders got up again, nervously glancing at the kids. “We have time for a private written ballot.” Her suggestion rejuvenated some strong applause.

Schultz squinted, looking almost cross. “No, this is not a democratic exercise, my decision is made. However, if you wish, you can have a show of hands.” He paused for more grumbling. “Okay, Mister Nash, conduct your poll—make it quick.”

Still standing, Nash pointed at the portals. “Perhaps you could have those windows closed, Mister Schultz.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

Nash scowled. "All right, those who agree with, um, my position show hands and keep them up." Maybe half raised an arm, including two black teachers—an older man nearby, and a young P.E. teacher with Van Burton. At Allen's table, the math teacher, the couple who came in late, and Nash voted.

Nash finished counting and scribbled on some paper. "I make out thirty-seven votes, well over fifty percent." He sounded miffed by his own exaggeration. "Those who agree with Mrs. Berg." Nash counted a scattering of voters, including Allen, Miss Dorsey, and Monique, who raised her arm reluctantly.

"Thirteen, which means about twenty did not vote." Nash sneered at Dorsey's friend. "That still leaves us with a very strong statement of how most of us feel on this issue."

"Okay, Mister Nash, you had your vote." The principal barely paused. "My decision is suspension for ten school days."

Complaints erupted; Nash pointed at Schultz. "At the very least, you should double the suspension."

"Have a seat, Mister Nash." Schultz glared at him until he sat down. "Quiet please." He waited again, then spoke over the remaining noise. "Mrs. Berg, please arrange for Sandra's schoolwork." He faced the whole audience. "Teachers are expected to cooperate with Mrs. Berg's requests. Okay, that's it—everyone try to have a good day."

Most of the faculty started to leave, but Nash and a couple of others immediately cornered Schultz to bicker. Allen got up from the bench and heard a lot of teachers complaining as they herded themselves to the exits. Monique went over to Mrs. Berg.

The imposing man who was sitting with Dorsey walked right for Allen. As he approached, his eyes seemed aggravated and droopy at the same time; his complexion had the sheen of a pecan shell. "I'm Frank Williamson, Social Studies—I need to talk to you for a second outside."

Allen nodded, then they walked together to the south exit. Williamson took a pen from his denim shirt pocket, where he wore a picture button of a familiar-looking middle-aged black woman. "I'm helping Mrs. Berg." Eyes forward, he spoke in a full but very deep voice, unconcerned that nearby faculty might overhear.

They entered the archway; Williamson jotted something in his three-ring

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cloth binder, its orange cover with U.S. GRANT HIGH SCHOOL in black script. “Besides your two classes, Sandra has me in *sosb* and a sub in P.E.—her Math, Science and Home Ec. teachers will stall with her homework.”

Allen answered quietly. “But Schultz said they had to cooperate.”

He was still looking in his notebook. “Yeah, can you have her work to me tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

They walked out of the archway into the courtyard; the non-uniformed guard was on patrol near long lines of students at the portals. Most of the teachers had scattered, but two women glared at Allen. He turned to Williamson. “Do you know what Sandra’s troubles were in elementary school?”

He was writing again. “I guess she was a brawler—even beat up some boys. Missed a lot of school.”

“Can I ask why you didn’t speak up for her?”

He raised his thick brows but still didn’t face him. “It wouldn’t have helped—I sat this one out.”

“I noticed you didn’t vote.”

His eyes narrowing critically, Williamson finally looked at Allen again. “I knew the suspension was coming. Besides, my vote was with Mrs. Morgan.”

“Yeah, that should’ve been an option.”

They stopped in the middle of the courtyard at a brick kiva, about ten feet across, probably a garden at one time. Williamson put his foot on the short wall, flipping to a different page. Three kids, eating nearby, walked slowly away.

Allen stared at a thin cypress in the middle of the kiva—beneath it, wads of old chewing gum pebbled the hard dirt. A galvanized trash can nearby smelled of sour milk. “Don’t you think Schultz did all he could?”

“It helps that he’s a short-timer.” Williamson kept studying the notebook.

“What do you mean?”

“Schultz is retiring—he’s actually stood up to them three or four times this year.”

“Oh. What’s the story with the vice-principals? Godina seems okay.”

He faced Allen again. “Ricky *Gub-dye-nub*—that’s what he calls himself—Ricardo usually goes along with the status quo.”

“I already had a run-in with Mrs. Ishimoto over Sandra.”

Williamson’s solemn face momentarily shadowed a smile. “Well, that’s to

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your credit.” He put his leg down. “That woman is a menace, a cop in a bad crime movie—Mrs. Moto, like the detective.”

What detective?

The social studies teacher frowned again, closing his notebook. “Here’s another news flash for you—Moto, Ricardo, and some guy from Verdugo Hills are the three finalists to be the new principal.” Williamson walked away without another word.

8

Allen continued with *firm but fair* that Wednesday, starting with what was still a girls' homeroom. Plenty of juvenile antics counteracted his rigidity during the day, as well as a couple of minor confrontations. The worst incident was a fight between two small boys over, of all things, a toy car. They landed some glancing blows before he stopped it, eventually taking them to Godina, but it was such a generic kids' tussle that Allen laughed about it to himself.

He worked on some papers after school, then went downstairs to ask Venable for an outside key. She said there weren't any extra keys and told him that after he got into "the swing of things," he wouldn't need one. On the way back to his room, he stopped in to see Monique. Allen knocked and entered, finding her stirring some yellow tempera paint at a sink near the end of the long counter beneath her windows.

"Another day under your belt, *mon ami*. How did it go?"

"Better than yesterday, as far as discipline. I do have some good writers—Charmane is one of them."

"I hear the inevitable *but* coming."

"Yeah, from what I've seen so far, their abilities run the gamut from illiterate to poetic."

She kept stirring. "Yes, very true."

"I had fewer kids today—only two of my classes were about the same between the two days. Is it always like that?"

"We have some stable times, but attendance is always a problem."

He tried to disguise a sigh. "I just have a couple of ideas about what to

teach. Once I have a better grip on what they can do, I was hoping for some help from you.”

“Of course, whenever you’re ready.” She began pouring the paint into jars.

He told her what Venable said about the key. “What does she mean by the *swing of things*?”

“It means here at seven-thirty when they open the front door and gone at three-fifteen when they lock up—the minimum.”

“I need more time than that before school.”

“I’m sure you do.” She made a droll smile. “The *key* to your problem, pun intended, is that I am almost always here right at seven. Why don’t you just meet me near the guard shack a little before seven tomorrow?”

“Okay, that will help a lot.”

“I’ll be glad to have the escort, which reminds me that I have another favor to ask.”

“Sure.”

She was securing lids on the jars. “When we have student assemblies or activities, would you mind if we take our classes down together?”

“I don’t mind at all.”

“*Merci*. As they say, strength in numbers.” She put the jars in the cupboards, then turned to him and began to wash up. “So how are you feeling about Sandra’s inquisition?”

He vaulted back onto the counter, dangling his legs. “Thirteen votes—pretty lousy.”

Drying her hands, she sat down—you could barely see her desk for all of the student art projects on display. “Try not to be too discouraged.”

“I just hope Sandra isn’t.”

“Charmane doesn’t think so.” She sighed. “You have a few enemies now, but that was inevitable. You did the right thing.”

“Yeah, so did you and Mrs. Berg. I liked what you said about your daughters. Are they in L.A.?”

“No, one in San Francisco, and one farther up the coast. Anyway, it’s easier for Sharon and me to rock the boat a little—we’re too old for anyone to bother.” She smiled. “You give us some hope, *chéri*.”

“C’mon, I’m just trying to make it through the week.”

She chuckled a little, straightening some student papers at a small side table. “Oh, I think you’ll pull that off.”

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"I appreciate the encouragement. I met Frank Williamson after the meeting—he gets along with Ishimoto about like I do."

An uncharacteristic frown showed some age lines around her mouth. "Frank's heart is always in the right place. Mrs. Ishimoto keeps waiting and hoping for him to slip up."

"Does she really have a shot at being the principal?"

"Worse than that, she has the inside track."

"Good God." He sighed. "I suppose Nash supports her."

"Oh, yes. The two of them tried to institute *voluntary* morning prayer after the Pledge. With Greg's help, the ecumenical Christians and some others among us put a stop to it."

"But Nash still likes you, even though you disagree."

She smiled and sighed at the same time. "Which has given me all the more leverage to get what I need around here."

Allen laughed a little. "I see—very practical." He raised a brow. "How does Nash get along with students?"

"He's quite proud that he rarely has confrontations of the sort you had yesterday."

"Are you saying they respect him?"

"No. Since he transferred here from Manual Trades, most of the older students stay away from him as if he's crazy."

"I'll second that."

"They mean crazy as in dangerous."

"Him? Why?"

She leaned over to pick up some papers. "It's not anything to worry about with your seventh-graders, but eventually you'll deal with older kids. Settle in a few more days, then Frank or I will fill you in more on Simon the Zealot."

"What?"

"Of the biblical Simons, that fits him best."

"Great." He hopped down from the counter and started for the door.

"Allen, we do have some good people here. Focus on them and your students, and stay away from the others."

"Yeah, I'm trying."



On Thursday morning, the guys in the black Olds were there, parked on Harding under a tree as Allen made his turn before seven o'clock. He tried to dismiss them to his paranoia and pulled into the lot to wait for Monique, hoping she might clue him in on Miss Watson. *Like she'd go out with a chubby white boy.* He parked and shut off the motor but kept the radio on.

The news was reporting on grievances by black sanitation workers who wanted Martin Luther King to come to Memphis on their behalf. Though not active himself in civil rights or politics, Allen had read about King's connections to Thoreau and Gandhi, guessing that he was probably into Zen as well. He considered Doctor King to be unique in the West, merging a benevolent Jesus with Eastern thought and *Civil Disobedience*.

A ten-year-old red Pontiac with the unmistakable fiery-haired woman behind the wheel pulled into the nearly empty lot and headed for the Volvo. Unlike Allen, Monique didn't close her windows or lock the doors until after she parked.

They both got out. "*Bon jour, Allen!*"

He smiled. "Good morning."

"Yes, a nice quiet one." They started toward the school, Allen carrying his fruit box, she lugging the enormous colorful purse over her shoulder.

"Anyone in there yet, Monique?"

"Yes, Linda and Jean start at seven."

"Linda and Jean?"

"Miss Watson, and Mrs. Eichler, the counselors' secretary."

So it's Linda—tan linda.

"You're smiling, *chéri*."

Blood moved up his face into a full flush as they passed the locked security hut. "Uh, do you happen to know if Miss Watson . . ." He sighed; they stepped into the crosswalk.

"My, my." She made a teasing smile. "Yes, isn't she a lovely young woman?"

"How long has she been here?"

"Just this year, and I don't think she's in a serious commitment, but I'm not completely sure."

"Oh?"

"Are you much of a religionist, Allen?"

"Uh, Christmas is about it—why?"

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"I'm *not* trying to discourage you, believe me, but Linda does belong to a charismatic church."

"Like speaking in tongues, that sort of thing?"

"Maybe not, I don't really know."

"Thanks for telling me." The black car was gone from down the street; she unlocked the door, and he held it for her.

Inside, Monique smiled toward the secretaries. "I'm going straight up. Have a good morning, *amour*."

"Okay, you too." He walked into the office.

Mrs. Eichler, a thin, drab-looking white lady in her forties, was typing at Venable's desk as Miss Watson collated papers at the counter and looked up at him with a sociable but business-like smile. "Good morning, Mister Greene."

"Morning, Miss Watson." He put his box on the counter, removing the lid as if he had to find something.

"Mister Greene, in case you wondered, the homeroom mix-up happened because downtown listed you as *Ellen* Greene." She grinned slightly. "So you and Miss Latham are to switch today—your new list is in your box. They want you to take the girls to her after the tardy bell—359, at the end of your floor."

"Any chance they'd let it stay like it is?" He closed the box, leaving his hands on the lid.

"I doubt it, but you can ask."

"Thanks." Allen started to turn away.

"Mister Greene?"

"Yes?"

Allen had turned so eagerly that she furrowed her brows slightly before smiling. "You and some other new teachers have a meeting at seven-thirty with Mister Schultz."

He could barely look at her. *Bozo*. "Okay, thanks."

"You're welcome." She nodded behind. "You can come back or wait in his office."

Allen left with his box and entered the well-lit lounge, no staff in sight, so he decided to wait there for his meeting. The converted classroom had sofas and plush chairs all around, and one wall with cheap cheery posters where the windows had once been. Behind a long conference table, a door in a partition led to the other half of the room, the teachers' work area.

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A white sheet cake on the table had Welcome New Teachers! in cursive scarlet frosting around a red apple, MARSHALL EDUCATION ALLIANCE printed below in green. Sitting far from the cake, he studied and reworked his plans until some jabbering teachers came in at 7:20. Allen put his materials in the box and went out for his mail.

He found the new homeroom list and put it on top of his pile as he returned to Schultz's open door. Looking in before entering, the vacant office was barely large enough for two tall bookcases, shelves, and a modest desk.

He took a wooden chair from a stack by the door, unfolded it and sat down. Before he could check his mail, a young woman his age walked in, smiled slightly, and then turned away for a chair. She was a gawky five-ten or so with dark-brown hair that almost filled the white square on the back of her crisply ironed sailor outfit. She faced him, her gaunt angular features and pocked complexion somewhat mitigated by heavy makeup and her lustrous hair. She made a nervous giggle and sat, properly smoothing the sides of her navy-blue skirt.

"Hi, I'm Allen Greene." He reached down for his mail.

"Sydney Latham. Isn't it hilarious?" Her full smile revealed a small retainer on her upper front teeth. "They took me for a male and you for a female."

"Yes. Hilarious."

"You've heard we're switching? Well, of course you have. Wait until you see what they did for us in the lounge."

God, it's Olive Oyl. Allen attempted a friendly nod as she kept talking. He looked at the principal's books, diplomas, trophies, and family photos, then heard the end of her question.

"... decided what you'll take for extracurricular?"

"I didn't know I had to."

"I have Good Grooming—I'm very pleased," she hardly took a breath, "and everyone's so nice here, and so helpful. Oh, we're in the same department too."

"Are we?" He picked up a stapled note that he hadn't noticed.

"Yes, I have two Home Ec. classes and four eighth-grade Language Arts—so I'm with the English department most of the time. I didn't think you were the one who quit."

Allen looked up. "What do you mean?"

She was checking her clear-polished nails. "There's a rumor that a new

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English teacher quit. After you spoke up at the meeting, they were sure it was you.”

They? He opened the paper.

“So where did you do your fifth year and student teaching?” she asked.

“I didn’t.” Peripherally, he saw her stand to peek through the curtain into the outer office.

“Oh. I’m working on my Master’s at UCLA.”

“When the smog lifts.”

“What?”

He didn’t face her. “You see—L.A.”

“Oh,” she said again, then sat down quietly.

Allen’s note was from Godina. Michael had been caught with a weapon and expelled, Rupert suspended for the previous day plus detention. He picked up the new homeroom list and spotted *Marlon Brown* and *Darrel Hayes* as the door opened. The young black teacher who was so chummy with Van Burton walked in ahead of Schultz. His natural hair trimmed to a quarter-inch, the new coach was a bit shorter than Allen but obviously muscular, even in sweats.

The principal made hasty introductions, then he said that the new math teacher was absent; the other two new hires were veteran substitutes who already knew the ropes. He explained some procedures, then handed out more paperwork, mentioning the homeroom switch.

Allen cleared his throat. “Wouldn’t it be easier if we didn’t change?” He saw Latham’s jaw drop.

Schultz shook his head. “No, we can’t do that. You’re supposed to have them for three years—that’s the concept anyway.” He then “volunteered” the PE teacher and Allen for small stipends to be two of the four sponsors for boys’ intramural sports. Allen told him he didn’t have much experience, but Schultz smiled and said, “Welcome aboard.” The jock smirked, no doubt looking forward to creaming Allen’s teams.

Latham clapped once, making a sappy smile. “My Good Grooming girls could do some cheers for *all* the teams.” The PE teacher grinned; Allen checked his homeroom list again—his eyes went right to *Rupert Washington* at the bottom.

“... have plenty to do, Miss Latham,” Schultz was saying, then he frowned.

“We’ve probably lost that math teacher, which makes three already, but don’t let that be discouraging. I expect that you three and the other two will hang in there and do a good job.”

Sure. He walked out a few feet behind Latham, who was nattering into the PE teacher’s ear. Schultz had given them all a time and station for assigned duty; a guard would be there for the first one. Allen leaned his box on the counter, away from Venable. “Miss Watson, may I leave this behind here? I’m on duty right now.”

“That’s fine, Mister Greene.”

“Thanks.” After putting the box down, he hurried out to the courtyard. The non-uniformed guard was standing in the sun near the south archway. Without his coat, tie, and short blond hair, the guy could have passed for Allen’s brother. Just over six feet tall with a slight beer-belly, he had a puffy ordinary face and trimmed mutton chops. Perhaps five years Allen’s senior, the guard had two small black leather cases attached to his belt.

“Mister Greene?” His *mister* sounded like *mistuh*.

“Yes, it’s Allen.”

“I’m Cecil Walls, pleasure t’ meet ya’.”

They shook hands. “Hi, Cecil.”

“So this here’s pretty calm before school—be glad you’re not here at noon.” His twang was so loud that anyone within fifteen feet could probably hear him. In the shade of the archway, throngs of students and a few staff members filed back and forth between the two buildings, some of the kids heading for the benches under the eucalyptus.

Cecil buffed one of his black steel-toed shoes on the back of a pant leg, then he turned toward the scores of kids in the three lines up to the cafeteria, where the other guard watched over them; Cecil pointed that way. “That there’s Nick Deniker.”

Deniker likely heard his name but didn’t respond. He wasn’t as young or tall as Cecil; it was hard to tell if he was brawny or just heavy in his loose grey khaki uniform, a security patch on one arm. Deniker wore a tan cap, its flat bill down over sunglasses; his pink chin was all you could see of his face. He had more paraphernalia attached to his belt than Cecil did.

“I’m reg’lar at this school—Deniker’s in charge here an’ at Grant.” He finally lowered his voice. “He don’t say much but knows what he’s about when

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it comes to kickin' butts." A group of kids milled around the kiva; a boy tossed his gum, bouncing it off a girl who sat on the short wall, drinking juice. She loudly cussed the boy out; Deniker approached them.

Cecil turned from the little spat. "Yup, quiet this time a' day, but most staff call this here the coliseum."

"What?"

"You know, like in biblical days, folks gettin' slaughtered an' all."

"Isn't that a bit much?"

Cecil laughed a little. "Ask me that after a week 'r two." He raised an arm to point again. "Down that end's where the other teacher's at. Even better duty than what you got—that door there to the cafeteria's usually locked."

The faraway teacher's back was visible in the shade of the other arch; the few kids down there avoided him as if he had foul body odor. The man turned slightly, showing his telltale chain and briefcase.

"Anyway, this here's also your emergency station—you an' the boys' counselor. He's here at noon, when he shows."

"Emergency station?"

Cecil grinned at what he seemed to think was a naïve question. "We shut down sometimes for emergencies, an' they ask ya' to be here. Let's see, since I come this year, it's four times. Had us a outsider shoot out some windows, an' we shut down for a high-school fight that—" He stopped because a girl ran right up behind him, shielding herself from a boy who was chasing her.

"Y'all move on now." Cecil turned from the kids, smiling. "Most of 'em ain't bad. Them ninth-graders got more schoolin' than me—got my certificate in the army." He made a self-deprecating laugh. "Anyway, we had two a' our own big fights an' kept 'em from turnin' bigger." He squared his shoulders proudly. Deniker came back within twenty feet or so, but he stayed away, aloof and suspicious.

"We got all the latest crowd control devices." Cecil pronounced it, *DEE-vices*, pausing to affectionately pat a case on his belt. "This here handles most problems, an' it—"

"So what do *I* do?"

Cecil frowned a bit at Allen's change of subject. "Jus' remind 'em of the rules. It gets serious, call us or go to the office." He touched a bulge at the other side of his coat, likely a radio. "Y'r here 'til the warnin' bell from the gym."

“Okay, got it. I take it you’re not from L.A., Cecil.”

He smiled. “My Razorback accent stands out here, don’t it? You from L.A.?”

“Born and bred.”

“Dodger fan?”

“No, Pirates—the Hollywood Stars were their farm team.”

“I get ya’. That Clemente’s a great player, but the Cards’ll do it again this year”

They talked baseball right up to the warning bell. Allen went in, took his time getting the box from near Miss Watson’s desk, then hurried upstairs. *Got your smile, cad.* Back on his floor, the passing bell had rung and most of the girls were waiting by the door, not even fooling around. At the north end of the hall, the boys boiled out of Latham’s room, some of them yelling and slamming lockers.

He came to his door. “Morning, girls, today’s the day. I’m taking you down to Miss Latham.”

One girl feigned a pout. “You don’t like us, huh?”

“You know this is the way they do it. I’ll see a lot of you in English or Creative Writing.”

Denise scowled at a friend. “Least we ain’t got him three times no more.” The girls started some nervous banter about the sudden change.

“Okay, keep the same locks—clear out your space and then we’ll go quietly.”

They were ready when the tardy bell rang. Allen led them down the hall; Latham was helplessly shushing the boys as Denise came up to them. “Fools, get outta our way.” Many of the boys just waited, some seething; the girls laughed at the ones who cringed by the walls.

Allen stopped and signaled with a hand. “All right, let’s go, guys.” They walked slowly ahead, a lot of them moping. About half of the boys looked like elementary-school kids; three of the others were in gold, and five in black, including Marlon, who dutifully followed Rupert.

The scar on Rupert’s chin mimicked his downturned mouth as he faced Allen. “Michael said he’s gonna see you, Greene.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?”

“Jus’ passin’ on what he said.”

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Acting unconcerned, he told the boys to keep moving. Behind, some girls squabbled over their lockers; Latham whined at them. Round little Darrel clutched his padlock and waddled down the hall, staying near Allen.

Cecil came to the top of the middle stairway and walked quickly toward them. From several feet away, the guard called out. "What's alla this?"

Marlon laughed, then mumbled, "Cracker." Some of the other boys snickered.

"Just switching homerooms, Mister Walls."

Cecil looked past him at the commotion down at Latham's room. "Best see if she needs help."

As soon as Cecil went by, some of the boys ran off to get first dibs on a locker; Allen walked faster. "All right, take it easy; they're all the same."

A small fair-skinned boy already staked claim to one of the lockers by the room. Half his body inside, he looked up and out at Rupert. "I was here first—can't have it, big ugly nigger!" Allen race-walked toward them.

"You dead, T.R." Rupert reached down to grab him, but a tall kid in gold jumped on his back, and they started landing blows; the other boys in gang colors began shoving each other around—arms, padlocks and books flying.

Allen pushed through the spectators. "Knock it off, now!" The scuffling stopped as soon as he shouted, probably because Cecil had returned. The boy in gold had a swollen eye and was staggering; both he and Rupert kept their fists cocked. Darrel and some small boys cowered in Monique's doorway.

Holding a canister, Cecil had situated himself right between the two rivals. "Okay, who wants some a' this?" They lowered their arms; the guard frisked them both at the wall, finding a knife on Rupert.

As Cecil led them away, the small thin boy was still inside the locker. In a Mister Magoo T-shirt, he had a freckled dun-brown face and very long auburn hair, which Marlon was clutching as if he were about to take a scalp. Allen glared at him. "Let go of him right now."

Marlon stood up straight, releasing the boy's hair; he wiped his hand on his jeans as if he had contracted cooties. "You hippie punk, T.R. I'll get you later."

T.R. launched himself from the locker toward Marlon, but Allen easily caught the slight boy by the shoulders. Monique peeked out of her door and saw Allen holding back a dervish of flailing limbs that kept yelling, "Lemme go!"

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“When you calm down.” The boy squirmed again, then went half-limp. “All right, everybody in—let’s go.” He released T.R., who grumbled and walked to the door; Allen turned to the others. “Marlon, you’re going to leave him alone, got that?”

“You can’t do nothin’ after school.”

T.R. sniggered. “You’ll never catch me, elephant butt.”

Allen walked in, ordering everyone to sit down and be quiet. About half of the boys were new to him, so as soon as they settled, he started on his discipline speech. When he came to the part about the rule chart, Marlon interrupted.

“Ain’t no golden rules, jus’ black rules.” Behind Marlon, the other three remaining boys in black laughed.

He pointed at them. “In here, you follow the *Greene* rules . . .” Allen finished his speech and made everyone stay seated. He kept an eye on those four boys; maybe Marlon would talk to him about Michael when the others weren’t around.

Homeroom turned out to be the roughest part of that day. Allen had two bonuses after school, the last-minute cancellation of the regular staff meeting, and the news that a PE teacher would take his intramural teams.

He got out of there before four-thirty, walked to the lot and finally met the parking guard, who looked his part in a light-blue uniform, though he had no security devices. Tall and heavy-set with wizened dark-brown skin, greying hair, and a steady wide smile, the man had just closed the door of the hut as Allen walked up the driveway.

“Afternoon, Mister. New teacher?”

“Hi. Yes, Allen Greene.”

“Name’s Marv.” They shook hands. “I guess that little ol’ grey job over there’d be you.” He pointed to the nearby Volvo among six or seven cars remaining in the lot.

“Yeah, how did you know?”

Marv chuckled. “Well, you’re young—that usually fits a primered car with no chrome. Gonna paint it?”

“Someday, I guess—stopped the rust, anyway.”

“Yes sir, ya’ did.” Marv laughed. “Yup, it’s always between here an’ the street, an’ still there when I get off. Means ya’ come early and go late.” He reached for a padlock.

“You’re quite the detective, Marv.”

The guard grinned. “Part a’ my job, Mister.” He bolted and locked the door.

Allen waved. “Okay, see you later.”

He made it out of the neighborhood well before dark but didn’t go home. Allen had left Trudy another note; he stopped for fast food again, then did his schoolwork at the library.

On Friday morning, he had cereal with Trudy—Rick was already gone to the beach. Allen watched for the black Olds on the last blocks to school, but he didn’t see it. After Monique came, they walked off in some rare steady rain; she asked from under her scarlet parasol why he parked near the back.

“To walk in the rain, I guess.” He pulled the windbreaker’s flimsy hood over his hastily brushed mop of hair.

“Yes, the air is wonderful, and tomorrow we’ll have one more day to breathe all the way in.”

“Yeah, I hope my brother-in-law’s enjoying it.” On the way inside, he told her a little about Trudy and Rick.

Unlike Monique, the other adults he encountered during the day grizzled over the wet weather as if it were a regular event. His homeroom boys were resigned to their new situation, and most of the Language Arts students did their work without much bellyaching. Allen attributed the calm day to the rain and the expulsion or suspension of about half of his twenty or so kids he considered to be aggressively or passively hostile, including Rupert and his adversary in gold, Aaron.

Sitting behind piles of student papers after school, Allen was making some calculations. Besides homeroom, he had a hundred and seventy-nine students, including ten repeats in last period. Attendance hadn’t improved, but he did have at least one writing sample from every kid, except for the five no-shows.

Allen waded into the two piles he still had to check. He wrote a brief comment on each paper and made a tally before going on. He finished in an hour and a half and came up with a preliminary estimate—almost a third of his students, more than fifty, demonstrated little or no ability to write.

Suspicious of the tracking system, he dug out the levels for Creative Writing, since those kids were from all three tracks. Already knowing that Ronnie, Charmane, and several more track-one kids could write well, he discovered the complete opposite for three high-level students who, thus far, had showed very low ability. *Tracking system, my ass.* He glanced at the clock—it was almost five and probably too late to talk to Monique.

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Allen had left a window open to hear the rain; he leaned back, stared outside at the clouds, then closed his eyes. *Steady drips on metal—tires on the streets—sirens faraway—bickering ravens—a radio—Aretha—r-e-s-p-e-c-t.* The song brought him back—he sat up, trying to focus on the papers in front of him.

There was a soft knock on his door before Monique entered in a dark-crimson suit with costume jewelry, not the usual handcrafted necklace. “Allen, am I bothering you?”

“You can’t bother me—I thought you’d be gone.”

“I’m just burning some late-afternoon oil like you are—looked in and saw you waking up from your catnap.”

“I wasn’t exactly napping.”

“What do you mean?”

He gestured toward the folding chair by his desk. “I was sort of meditating.”

“Oh?” She sat down. “How did you get interested in that?”

“Well, like the kids say, *would you believe* I started reading some Zen Buddhism in a jungle?”

“My, my.” She grinned, interested, but not pushy.

Allen looked out; the clouds seemed to be bringing on an early dusk. Below, he didn’t see anyone at all.

“Enjoying your bird’s eye view of the coliseum?”

“What? Yeah, you really want to hear this?”

“Certainly.”

He sighed. “Okay, I’m pretty good at quitting things—dropped out of college a few times before I finally made it. After that, I fooled around in Oregon, then went into the Peace Corps for something to do. They stuck some married couples and a few more of us in a Puerto Rican rainforest for training and Spanish.”

“Really? How well do you speak it?”

“I get by. We heard more propoganda than Spanish from our Cuban teachers—I learned more in L.A.” He paused. “They also sent us down there to get used to isolation. After two months, I *didn’t* get used to it.”

“Were you ill?”

Allen’s sigh finished as a scoff. “Their damn shrink said I wasn’t coping—*reclusive and depressed*. But they had this little library where I found a few

books by Zen masters. I came up with my own version of meditation and was actually feeling better before I left. It gives me a way to gather myself.”

“Even here?”

“Yes, after things calm down. I figured out down there that when I’m around a lot of noise, I hear everything but listen to nothing. When it’s quiet, I hear it all—my big epiphany.”

She reflected for a few moments. “Fascinating. Maybe you can recommend some reading to me.”

“Sure, but you didn’t come to hear my sad little story.”

“You shouldn’t minimize what you accomplished, Allen.” She lowered her eyes, making a rare frown. “Okay, I have a bit of a problem and wanted to ask another favor.”

“Ask away.”

“My squash-blossom necklace was stolen. I—”

“At school?”

“Yes. I put it in my purse during homeroom yesterday when I was mixing paint and didn’t notice it was gone until prep. It was my grandmother’s—a century old and one of a kind, so the police say they might have a chance to find it.”

“Sorry, Monique, I hope they do.”

“After all these years, it hadn’t crossed my mind to stop wearing it.” She looped a bangle with her forefinger. “It was foolish, and I’m just not as quick on the uptake anymore.”

“C’mon, I think you’re doing great for—”

“For such an old bat?” She laughed. “I’m sixty-eight, Allen. I’m finally going to retire.”

“Oh. What I meant was I see how hard you work and, well, the kids will miss you.”

“Thank you, I’ll miss most of them.” Her smile faded. “Anyway, my homeroom is the problem. I told Greg last year I’d rather not start a new group of seventh-graders, but he talked me into it. After all these months, I still have three or four rough girls I don’t know very well. I’ve never had that many—I usually work things out with anyone who sticks around.”

“How can I help?”

“I might need your support if things get crazy and no one happens to be

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downstairs. I hear the girls talking—some of them think ol' codgers like me just tune them out." She made a self-effacing chuckle. "You have about half of my girls, Allen. What I hear is they already respect your authority."

"I sound tougher than I am, believe me. It bothers me to act like that."

"Most of them understand that it's what you have to do. I think they relate to your youth, and they like that you level with them. Anyway, if there's trouble ahead I can't handle, I might have to call on you—probably won't even happen."

"Whatever I can do." He glanced at all the papers in front of him. "Will you miss teaching, Monique?"

"I still plan to teach art, maybe at night school."

"That's great."

"Yes, my passion, though I feel pretty good about my other work here." She sighed. "But the timing is right for me to go, especially if Mrs. Ishimoto is the new principal."

"Do most of the kids despise her like Charmane does?"

"She sponsors the Honor Society—a few of those kids patronize her, just enough that she thinks she gets along with the *right kind* of students. Mrs. Ishimoto is also my evaluator."

"Man, how do you deal with that?"

"Quite easily. She breezes through my room twice a year and writes the same blithering nonsense every time."

"Oh." *Wait.* "Is that how it works for Nash and Anders?"

"Yes, once the door closes, veterans are avoided like the plague. Allen, like any good teacher, you hold *yourself* accountable. You can't control the rest of it."

"You really think I can do this."

"Yes, *amour.*"

"We'll see. Got a minute for a couple questions?"

"Of course." She glanced at his file boxes. "How are the journals working out?"

"Fine for some, not so hot for others. I finished their first two papers, and I'm trying to decide what to do about . . ." As he shared some of his observations, she mostly nodded, or added examples to back him up. ". . . and haven't the kids been drilled for years on letter sounds and grammar?"

"Yes, and penmanship—some have lovely handwriting but can't read it, and there are others who can read aloud with no idea what they're saying."

"Shouldn't I try something different?"

“Yes, it’s never one way fits all, though that’s what our curriculum provides. I have a method that should help with some of your struggling kids. We can go look at my materials.”

“That’d be great. You use this method with track-three students?”

“I usually have a few in each class who somehow tested up, the opposite of Charmane. You’re right about the system—it drives some of us crazy, including your mentor, bless her heart. As she always says—”

“We can’t give up on any of them.”

She chuckled again. “That’s right.”

“Miss Dorsey is kind of a mystery to me.”

“She grew up four blocks from here, a preacher’s daughter. I’ve seen her practically eviscerate new teachers who laugh or brag about using street words like *hip* or *booty* with kids.”

“Because it’s a bad example?”

“That, and because it’s usually condescending.”

“I’ve made my mistakes already, but not that one.”

She smirked. “Yes, and you made it to Friday, and you don’t sound like someone who’s about to quit.”

“Yeah, four whole days.” He sighed again. “What do you do about the street English?”

“Not much—most of mine can switch at will in and out of the vernacular, like a bilingual skill, and it doesn’t show up much in their writing. Some of yours will be able to do the same, but the low literacy kids”

As they crossed the hall, Monique began to explain a technique she called “recitation.”

In her room, she showed him catalogued stories, prompts, fables, music, and even some comic strips she used to motivate low readers to recite. She recorded their responses, then typed them up at home to use as “relevant reading material.” She said it often gave reluctant readers more incentive to try.

Adapting her method on a larger scale would be his challenge. “What does the school say about it, Monique?”

She made an impish grin, accentuated by her small stature. “On the rare days I am evaluated, my students just happen to be using the textbook.”

“So you play that game in order to teach something useful to all the kids.”

“Yes, what our supervisors don’t know won’t hurt them. It’s a game I’ve always had to play, except in art.”

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He gazed out at the deepening dusk and the abandoned street. “I guess it’s time for white folks to hit the road.”

She nodded. “Remember, a lot of people who live here are just as scared as we are.”

“Yeah, good point, but since when are you scared?”

“Well, you’re not the only one who can act a little.”

“Then do you mind if I ask why you’ve stayed here so long?”

She pondered, grinning slightly. “Let’s see, Helen, Milton, Ava, Charmane—”

“Okay.” He smiled. “Can we talk more over the weekend about your reading approach?”

“Of course.” They exchanged phone numbers, gathered their things, and walked out together to the parking lot.

He drove away with Monique’s comments still on his mind. Other than fear, the damn Dodgers, and a new L.A. Zip Code, what else did Los Feliz and Watts have in common? After he left the freeway, Allen stopped to call Trudy, then got a burger before spending his Friday evening at the Glendale library.

A history book exposed a similarity between South-Central and Los Feliz right away—Watts had also been part of a Mexican land grant, *Rancho La Tajauta*. Named for its railroad station, Watts was annexed by L.A. in 1926. In the twenty-plus years since World War II, South-Central became predominantly black as people of all races migrated to the West for opportunity.

After reading that the Watts Towers were built on a whim by an Italian ironworker, Allen switched to some reports on the ’65 riots. The statistics shocked him. After the National Guard restored order, more than thirty people had died, a thousand-plus injured, and about four thousand arrested. Hundreds of mostly absentee-owned buildings were burned or looted. The casualties included rioters, cops, firefighters, and whites driving by, but most were local bystanders. Allen discovered that nobody was killed until the third day, after a top L.A. official publicly compared the rioters from the first days to monkeys in a zoo.

Several reports concluded that the destruction was carried out mostly by male youth, triggered by smoldering rancor over unfair and brutal behavior by some LAPD officers, and by sub-standard schools and public hospitals. A federal commission blamed white racism for rioting in the U.S., saying the

country was moving toward two separate but unequal societies, one black and one white. *Man—Selma, California.*

He didn't leave the library until they started to flick the lights. Allen stopped for a couple of beers, hoping to get home after Trudy and Rick were asleep. He pulled up to the curb after ten, but there was a light on in the dining room.

He went in and found his files, typewriter and books pushed to one side of the dining table. McMANUS FULL SERVICE income tax forms and receipts occupied most of the space. Allen put his box by the typewriter; Pedro saw him, then perked right up and started on "Reveille," getting the first part right before breaking into extemporaneous shrill whistling.

"Shut that fuckin' bird up." Rick's tired old complaint came from the kitchen, then he staggered in, drinking a tallboy. He was in a white T-shirt, red Bermudas and flip-flops.

"Is Trudy in bed?"

Rick put the beer by his papers and sat down. "All she ever does is sleep. Have big fun at the library, professor?"

Allen walked over to Pedro, now waiting quietly with his feet on the bars. He stroked the bird's head with a forefinger.

His eyes glazed over, Rick pointed to the tax papers. "You know anything about this shit?"

"Not for a business."

"My ol' man always did it." Rick tried to focus on Allen. "My brother says he hasn't seen you at the station."

"I don't go that way in the mornings anymore."

"You get your gas down there?"

"No, Atwater."

"Thanks a lot for your goddamn business—you can't drive a couple extra blocks?" He took a long slug of beer.

Allen draped the night veil over Pedro's cage. "I'm going to bed." He picked up his box.

"So you're goin' back there next week?"

"Yeah, don't forget Trudy's ten bucks."

"Fuck you. What do you think you're trying to prove?"

"Nothing. I'm working full time, isn't that what you wanted?"

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“She said you might move—that’s what I want.”

“As soon as I get paid.”

“The spear chuckers’ll run you off before that.”

“Maybe so—you’re more scared of them than I am.”

“So now you’re some sorta tough guy?” Rick laughed, then stood up, pointing with his wobbly arm. “Look, I know the crap you’re always puttin’ in Trudy’s head—”

“What are you babbling about?” His voice was getting as loud as Rick’s. Allen rested the corner of the box on the table.

“It’s so goddamn sweet, tellin’ her what *you’re* doin’ is the kinda shit she should do.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Close enough. You butt the hell outta my marriage, or I’ll kick your ass outta here.”

“Yeah? You lay another hand on Trudy, I’ll have you thrown in jail, friggin’ Cro-Magnon.” He picked up his box again.

“What’re you callin’ me?”

Trudy came in, squinting from the doorway in her long nightgown. “What’s all the yelling?”

“Nothing, I’m going to bed.” Allen walked right by her and down into the basement. While he was brushing his teeth and changing clothes, he heard them shouting, but only an occasional word was intelligible. He turned off the light and lay on the foldout bed, wide-awake, listening for a scream or something breaking, but they finally shut up.

After thinking over “Monique’s method” at the library on Saturday, he phoned her from there to brainstorm. They came up with the idea to partner non-readers with readers, the latter writing down recitations for the former. His first step would be to hear each student read, and then figure out the match-ups. Monique offered to share all of her writing prompts.

Rick went to the beach on Sunday, and Trudy felt well enough to do her volunteer time at Glenfeliz Geriatric, so Allen did his schoolwork by Pedro. Late that afternoon, he took a hike up to “The Beacon,” a local name for a hill in Griffith Park tall enough for an aircraft warning light. Spellbound by city’s cacophony mixed with the wild sounds from the dense chaparral, Allen stayed at the base of the tower until its huge lamp began to rotate and flash in the dark.

At school on Monday, he sensed a transformation in the students right away. Starting with homeroom, a lot of them were lethargic and so were some of the teachers he ran into. The lassitude was similar to what he first noticed among the staff and students at Adams High, then in college, and also at his delivery jobs—*the Monday-Friday BS*—Monday always the big gloomy downer and Friday the day of happy possibilities, regardless of actual circumstances.

With attendance up a bit and the unanticipated calm working in his favor, Allen jumped right into his project after homeroom. When fluency time was over, he started his first-period class on vocabulary assignments, and then heard seven students read before he ran out of time. He dismissed the class

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after the bell and saw Charmane dallying near her desk; Ronnie was waiting at the door again.

As the room emptied, Allen walked over to her; he held up a hand to let Ronnie know to wait. “Did you want to talk to me about something, Charmane?”

“Sandra’s keeping up with her work, Mister Greene, even in math. I see her every day after school to explain some of it—just wanted you to know.”

“Thanks for telling me, but I’m not surprised she’s keeping up. Tell her we’ll be glad when she gets back.” He saw that Ronnie was still waiting.

“I will, Mister Greene—see you last period.” She smiled but didn’t hurry off.

“See you.” He started for Ronnie at the back door. The closest thing to gold he had on was a yellow T-shirt under his thin green and grey flannel. The lights reflected off of his slick, dark scalp. “Do you have a question, Ronnie?”

“I, um, the writing we do in here is okay, but there’s something else I want to ask about.”

“Sure, what is it?” Charmane was hanging out nearby in the hallway.

“Poems.” The word sounded like *pomz*.

“A lot of your writing is already like poetry. Have you been reading some?”

“I check books out of the library and copy the way they do it, but with my words.”

“You’ve been *writing* poetry? Good for you.”

Ronnie looked at the floor. “I try, but I need some help.”

“Well, maybe we—”

Charmane came closer, then all the way in. “I want to learn how too.”

Ronnie’s eyes daggered right at her, then he started to leave. Allen moved toward him. “Ronnie, if both of you want to come in to work on poetry, we could do it mostly one-on-one.”

The boy stopped, his brow creasing. “How?”

“I could show you some things together, but then you’d write on your own. Let’s see, Tuesday won’t work for me, Thursday either. Do either of you have a commitment on Fridays after school?” They both shook their heads. “After Creative Writing on Fridays then?”

“I can.” Charmane spoke eagerly, not looking at Ronnie, who barely nodded to Allen.

“Okay, I’ll give you a note last period to take home today—maybe we can

start up this Friday.” Both kids took a step or two away. “Wait, you’re tardy, I’ll write you a pass.”

Taking different routes across the room, Ronnie and Charmane met Allen at his desk. He scribbled the passes, handed them over and watched his two students leave from separate doors, not looking at each other.

Before first period the next morning, Ronnie came to Allen’s desk, his head downcast. “My mom won’t sign the note.”

“Why not, Ronnie?”

“She just won’t.”

“Maybe I could call her or visit.”

“I wouldn’t do that. My brother’s always around in the day.” Ronnie walked away to get his fluency notebook.

When period one finished, Allen went down during prep to Mrs. Berg’s office—she had a spot where staff and students could sometimes make a semi-private school-related call. Mrs. Eichler found Ronnie’s number and led Allen to the phone. A “no longer in service” recording came on, so he copied the address before returning to his room.

After school, he finished plans for the next day, then went out to the car and drove down Harding Place. He made a right turn and pulled up in front of a faded-blue, flat-roofed duplex with chipped stucco, surrounded by six-foot iron poles and wire. Other than the sturdy fence, the place had no improvements; the yard had a concrete path in the middle with hard dirt on both sides, a small acacia to the left. An untied German shepherd, its eyes riveted on Allen, sat by the bush in some poor shade.

He reached over the gate for the latch, watching the large dog. It didn’t stir, so Allen entered slowly but acted confident, although he could hear himself breathing. The grey and black canine snarled once, glaring as Allen stepped over a turd on the path. He walked up the two steps, exhaled, then knocked on the door of the place at the left.

A guy about Allen’s height opened the front door but stayed behind the dark screen; his bright green jacket was about all that was visible. “Whaddya want?”

“I’m Ronnie’s English teacher.”

“So, I’m his brother. Is he in trouble?”

“No, may I speak to Mrs. Crawford?”

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“What about?”

“A permission slip for a poetry class.”

Ronnie’s brother stood there for a few seconds. “Hold on.”

He left, then a deep male voice came from the middle of the house. “Who the fuck is it?”

Arguing began, but Allen couldn’t pick up many more words, mostly the bellicose tone of the lower voice, the other one trying to reason with him. Ronnie’s brother came back to the screen. “You better get outta here now—he’s pissed.”

Allen immediately started to back away; his lunch seemed to turn over in his gut.

“Hey, teach.” The guy rattled the door a little. “I’ll have her sign it.”

“What? Uh, okay, thanks.” He turned from the small porch, one foot on the dirt, the other on the path. The German shepherd was behind him, now making a steady growl.

“Fritz!” After Ronnie’s brother shouted, the dog cringed but didn’t back off much.

Allen walked straight but steadily to the gate, knowing from Los Feliz dogs not to flee too fast. He went through, latched it, and headed for the Volvo—a pungent odor made him stop and look down. *Shit!* He pulled off the low-cut leather hiking shoe by its heel and slammed the front sole sideways on the curb; most of the orange-brown dog crap plopped onto the ground. Allen retched, expelling the contents of his stomach into the gutter. He hobbled to the trunk, threw in the stinking boot, then got in the car and shed the clean one.

Driving through the neighborhood in his socks, he rolled down the windows to help his stomach settle. He came to the dilapidated grocery; the Olds was parked there again, this time in the shadows on the store’s east side. He rolled his windows back up and accelerated past the black car to the freeway.



Without comment, Ronnie brought the signed note back on Wednesday. It took Allen until Thursday to finish the oral reading in all of his classes. The number of very low or non-readers was close to the estimate he made from

the writing, almost sixty kids. Their attendance was generally worse than the rest, so he expected to have plenty of volunteers in each class to tutor them. He decided to wait until the following Monday to start the new program.

At the end of Creative Writing that Friday, Charmane stayed in her seat, grinning contentedly. Ronnie left right away but came back as soon as the room cleared; he sat four rows away from her.

“Okay, you two, before we get started, I want you to know that we might end up with a few more kids in here. Apparently, the word got out.” Allen grinned at Charmane; Ronnie glared at her. “A couple of girls came to me and said they wanted to write poetry. If we keep it to five or six kids total, will you two be okay with that?”

Charmane smiled. “Sure, Mister Greene.”

“Ronnie?”

“All girls? If I don’t like it, I can just go.”

“I hope not. Okay, let’s get started. Before we work individually, I want to show both of you something about how free verse works” After his explanation, he had Charmane take one of her more creative essays and begin editing the extraneous words to convert the prose into verse. Ronnie had brought some of his poems; Allen tried to explain tactfully that his phrases were interesting and vivid, but sometimes it didn’t work to force everything into rhyme.

The small sturdy boy raised a brow. “I think I get what you mean, but how—”

He was interrupted by Miss Dorsey walking into the room. She looked at Charmane, then at Allen, her heels clacking on the way to the desk where Allen and Ronnie were working. “An extra class, Mister Greene?”

“Hi, Miss Dorsey. Yes, poetry.”

“So I heard.” Although her dour face was again compressed, Allen sensed that she was pleased that Ronnie was there at all. “Are the parents aware of this?”

“Yes, I have written permission for both students.”

“That’s a relief. One small problem, Mister Greene, you have to clear something like this with the principal.”

“I didn’t think he’d mind.”

“We cannot keep discussing this with students present.”

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“Oh.” Charmane and Ronnie were both watching them. “Would it be okay to talk about it on Monday?”

“No, I am sorry—Mister Nash is on his way here. He heard about this, and he also has a related issue.”

Crap. “All right, just let me give them some follow-up to do at home.”

“That will be fine.” Dorsey moved a few yards away, watching him work with Ronnie. The boy left after a minute or two, carrying a poetry anthology that Allen let him borrow.

He finished with Charmane, and then she went out, her nose in a book of poetry as Nash entered. The portly department chairman went right to Allen’s mentor, his face in a scold. “So, is it true, Miss Dorsey?”

“Yes, poetry.”

“Was he alone with that girl?” He sounded half-hopeful.

“No, he was not . . .” As Dorsey explained the situation, Allen walked closer to them.

Nash rested the briefcase on a desk but didn’t let it go, precisely adjusting the slack in the chain. “He didn’t even notify the school?”

“No, but he *will* be asking Mister Schultz for permission to continue.” Dorsey raised one brow. “Right, Mister Greene?”

“What? Yeah, sure. I don’t have an extra-curricular assignment anymore—maybe it can be the poetry group.”

Nash scoffed. “You might indeed convince the principal of that, Mister Greene, but word has also reached me that your students are writing poetry in Language Arts.”

“A little, but we haven’t really started yet.”

“Yet? Are you aware that poetry is not part of the seventh-grade curriculum, except as reading material?”

“You must mean a few poems by dead Englishmen in our text. Some of my smaller students have found a use for that old book—they sit on it.” Allen saw his mentor unsuccessfully cover a slight grin with her fist.

Nash scowled. “I don’t find that humorous, Miss Dorsey.”

Allen took a step closer. “If some students can express themselves better by writing poetry, why not encourage it?”

“Because your job is to teach the curriculum.” He turned away. “And Miss Dorsey, I expect you to see that he does. Who is his official evaluator?”

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“Mister Godina.”

“Oh.” He rolled his eyes and picked up the briefcase. “I will discuss this with him soon. Good afternoon.”

Nash walked away in a huff; Dorsey went to the door, peeked out, then turned to Allen. “Mister Greene, I recommend that you try to be a little more careful about what you say and do.”

“So I have to drop the poetry in my classes?”

“I did not say that. I said to be more careful—don’t put it in your lesson plans.”

“Oh.” Allen grinned slightly. “Thank you, Miss Dorsey.”

“See you on Monday, Mister Greene.” She walked away, shaking her head, betraying a hint of a smile.

Allen spent most of that weekend preparing for his new reading/writing approach and staying away from Rick as much as he could.

On Monday before school, he was down in the coliseum at his duty station near the south arch. With his list of possible reading match-ups in hand, he made some adjustments for his first-period class while also keeping an eye on the kids.

In his first two weeks of duty, Allen had dealt with a few arguments and scuffles, but nothing major, as Cecil predicted. Now there was some uneasiness, especially among the girls as they walked by or waited in the lines. It was more than the usual banter; he heard parts of dares and accusations, peppered with profanity. They seemed to be taking sides, but nothing actually happened, so there wasn't much he could do but tell a few of them to "Knock off the cussing."

He looked up from his lists, noticing that the lines had thinned out earlier than usual. A roar of voices broke out far behind him, almost like cheers after a home run in Dodger Stadium. Stuffing the lists in a back pocket, he ran for the end of the cafeteria, came around the corner and couldn't even see the benches below the old eucalyptus. Well more than a hundred kids yelled encouragement toward a small circular arena formed by the spectators. The warning bell rang.

He put his open hands by his mouth as he moved forward. "Outta the way, go to class, now!"

Some kids shouted "Teacher!" to those closer to the fracas. Allen waded

and pushed through the outskirts of the crowd, where it was nearly all boys, some of them standing on the benches and laughing. A lot of kids took off, but scores remained, mainly girls, pressed toward the circle; he still couldn't see the fight.

"Cop!" a girl yelled, and most of the kids began to leave. Deniker was up ahead, approaching two combatants, both of them tall girls, slender but physically mature—probably ninth graders. Oblivious to everyone else, they had their hands embedded in each other's long hair, one girl snarling epithets, the other fiercely quiet as she tugged back. Twirling in an unintended dance to avoid being yanked to the ground, neither girl appeared to be badly damaged, save for torn clothes and rumpled hair.

About a dozen kids remained nearby. "Outta here, all of you!" Allen sent them around the building, then turned to see the guard's large hands clamped in a vise-like grip around two thin wrists. The girls had let go of each other, but Deniker gave both arms a rough twist.

The quieter one yelped, limply submitting to the husky man's strength, but the other girl flailed, screaming, "Leggo a' me!" Deniker bent her arm to a radical angle; her face contorted and she cried out in pain, but he didn't ease off.

Damn, he'll crack it.

Deniker finally saw Allen and eased the tension on the struggling girl's arm. "If I let go, you two are going to shut up and walk right next to me, or I haul you in like this. Run away, and you're done here for good."

The more defiant one was crying now, and she said, "Okay, jus' leggo." Deniker released them, pointing at the asphalt by his khaki pant legs; the girls fell in obediently at each side, rubbing their arms and moaning as the passing bell rang. They walked by with the guard, who didn't give Allen a second look.

He hurried in and skipped stairs on the way up; a kid jokingly admonished him for breaking the rules, but Allen had Deniker on his mind. If the guard had been alone, he could have injured the girl's arm and blamed her.

As he came to his door just before the tardy bell, the boys were laughing in the hall about the "chick fight." Allen opened up and made them settle down for morning rituals, then he buzzed the office to ask if Schultz would be available second hour, but the principal was at a meeting downtown.

In first period, Allen had the kids hold off on fluency writing. Attendance was low, but he went ahead and explained the new program to eighteen

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students, doing his best to reduce the stigma for those who were going to be tutored. After a few gripes and questions, he read the list of nine kids who had to recite. Six were present—Charmane volunteered to be a tutor, then three more; Ronnie was the last. Allen gave the other kids a word puzzle, made the five match-ups and took the sixth student himself. All six cooperated, reciting the storyline of a favorite cartoon. Then Allen had the tutors and other readers write their own papers while he worked on skills with the rest.

Typing more than fifty pages at the end of the day was out of the question, so Allen had asked the tutors to write as legibly as possible. During second-period prep, he saw that most of them had printed; he was amazed by the clarity of the transcribed material. It went nearly that well in every class, not many kids refusing to recite. The transcriptions didn't need as much correction as he expected, and there were only a few non-readable papers he would have to decipher at home.

It wasn't until Wednesday that Allen was able to tell Schultz about Monday's fight. He came out to Allen's duty area in the morning and listened to his concerns about the guard. Schultz said there had not been a complaint from the girls, but he would talk to Deniker without mentioning names. "He'll probably figure it out, though."

"Yeah, probably." On his way upstairs, Allen was more worried about Rupert, who was eligible to return that day. His foe in the homeroom fight, Aaron, was already back from a shorter suspension. On the positive side, Sandra's two weeks were finally over as well.

When Rupert didn't show for homeroom, Allen self-confessed his relief. Ronnie, Charmane and two other girls arrived before the first-period tardy bell to begin writing along with Marlon and three more homeroom boys, but Sandra didn't come early on her first day back.

It was another warm day; Ronnie hung his gold long-sleeve shirt on the back of his seat before starting on his journal. Allen smiled to himself when Charmane said "E-I" back to Ronnie after he leaned over rows of desks to whisper a question.

After the bell, Allen only had to hassle two kids to begin writing. Just four of the twenty-five were absent, including Sandra. She came in late at the end of fluency time, her eyes red and swollen.

He walked up to her and took the excused tardy slip signed by Miss Watson. "Are you okay, Sandra?"

Downcast, she spoke very quietly. “Hi, Mister Greene. I’ll be all right.”

He answered in a whisper. “We’re glad you’re back—maybe we’ll talk later.” He returned to his desk to mark Sandra’s name and saw her quietly telling something to Charmane. “All right, everybody, let’s get started.” Allen read aloud an old graphic version of the Aesop’s fable about a cat who teaches a bragging fox a reliable way to escape his enemies.

“Okay, retell *The Fox and the Cat* in your own words—no profanity.” Most of the kids laughed because their first project, the one about cartoons, produced two recitations with profane dialogue between Bugs Bunny and Yosemite Sam.

“Storytellers get with your same scribes, the rest of you get started on your own.” He was answered by a few moans. “If you finish, read or write while you wait for us. After that, we’ll all be doing a *fun* exercise with adjectives. Okay, those who need a partner, come on up.”

Some kids groaned as they readjusted their desks to get as much privacy as possible before starting to work. Those who didn’t tutor started writing; Sandra and three boys came to the front of the room, including Ronnie, Del, and the usually wisecracking Marlon. He and Del, both new readers, were inches taller but not as robust as the wiry-strong Ronnie, whose previous partner was absent.

Sandra had settled down; he asked her to observe Charmane and see if she might want to be a tutor next time. It seemed to be an easy fix to the other match-ups, with the extra boy reciting to Allen. Since Marlon was a minion of the faction in black, Allen couldn’t partner him with Ronnie. Del, in a white T-shirt, was a sulky near-adolescent who preferred to sit and do nothing—at least Ronnie could work with him without any extraneous “gang” tension.

He made the matches, but Ronnie and Del glared at each other as they walked away. Keeping an eye on those two, Allen sat at his desk to hear Marlon, who was wearing a faded blue Dodgers T-shirt, not his usual black. “Good shirt, Marlon, but the Pirates are best in the league this year.”

“That jacket you had on the other day sure was ugly.”

Allen checked to be sure everyone was starting, especially Del and Ronnie at the back wall. “You don’t like my Pirates?”

“That black an’ gold jacket.”

Ah, sacrilege. “Okay, let’s get going.”

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Marlon looked around to make sure nobody could hear him. “Mister Greene,” he whispered, “Michael’s still pissed—you better watch for him.” Before Allen could react, Marlon raised his voice and began telling a detailed version of how “That cat was so smart . . .” Allen printed quickly, trying not to fret about Michael, glancing when he could at the class.

Not five minutes into the exercise, there was commotion from the desks at back, where Del snatched the recitation from Ronnie and crumpled the paper into a wad. “Fuck this!”

Ronnie shrugged. “Man, all you gotta do is talk.”

“All *you* gotta do is shut up, ball-headed little shit.” Del got up, tossing the paper at Ronnie’s face, but he missed.

Ronnie stood. “Nice shot, big baby.” He began to walk away, but Del sucker-punched him in the side of the head.

Allen had started across the room, but he stumbled over some kids yelling, “Fight!” He got by them in time to see several things happen ahead, seemingly in seconds: Ronnie tackled Del, who pulled a switchblade as he fell to the floor. The blade flicked open; he pointed it right at Ronnie, who fainted one way, then pushed him over and stomped his wrist. Del cried out in pain; the knife slid under the heater. Ronnie grabbed the taller boy by the scruff and pulled him halfway up.

Allen was a few feet from them. “Enough, let him go!” Ronnie did let go, shoving him away by the shoulders, but Del tripped over a desk and toppled hard onto the heat registers, his head making a sickening *thunk* as it struck steel. Allen took Ronnie’s arm; he didn’t resist, staring wide-eyed at Del, who lay motionless on the floor.

“Damn it to hell.” Allen got in Ronnie’s face and ordered him to stay put, then turned to the front of the room. “Hit the intercom button, Charmane!” She pushed a folding chair over to the PA.

First-aid priorities from a class in Puerto Rico jumbled through his mind. Del was unconscious but breathing; blood from the injury dotted his white shirt and the floor. Allen grabbed a boy’s coat from nearby and put it over Del. He pressured one hand to the wound and turned around, asking Sandra to go for some wet paper towels.

Charmane climbed down from the chair; the intercom garbled to life with Venable’s voice. “What is it, Mister Greene?”

"I have a bleeding unconscious boy—get us some help now!"

"An ambulance?"

"Yes!" Some kids were crowding around Del; Allen told them to back off and sit down. A minute or so later, Sandra returned with the towels; he cleaned away some blood and applied the damp compress firmly to Del's injury.

Cecil hurried into the room with a red first-aid kit and took over with the wound. He replaced the saturated paper towels with thick white gauze and kept up the pressure. Allen turned to the class—Charmane, Sandra, Marlon and some others intently watched Del and Cecil; several more were talking excitedly. Allen scowled at two boys who were laughing.

Holding the wound, Cecil turned to him. "Which one done this?"

Allen checked the kids again, making a frustrated sigh. "He's gone. It was Ronnie Crawford, but Del hit him first and pulled that knife." He pointed to it under the heater; there was a smear of blood on the tan registers.

"Get it for me, will ya?"

Allen picked up the switchblade and put it by Cecil's kit. With one palm pressuring Del's wound, the guard used his other hand to remove the walkie-talkie from his belt. The kids had calmed down, most just talking quietly. Cecil made a call to Deniker to report Ronnie, then faced Allen again. "Nick says the ambulance is gettin' close."

"Good." He had one of the boys go over to open the door. By the time they heard the gurney rattling in the hallway, Del still had his eyes closed. The bell rang; Allen told the kids to leave for next period by the rear exit.

At the front door, a tall middle-aged man in a plain white uniform guided a gurney into the room; some kids watched from the hall near a second ambulance attendant and a young blonde in a short skirt who Monique had pointed out previously as the school nurse.

The attendant with the gurney came to Allen and Cecil. He had unblemished fawn-colored skin. Allen read his name tag: CENTRAL AMBULANCE—SINGH, JAHAN. Moving quickly, Singh removed the coat and pulled a light blanket up to Del's waist, then he took a briefcase-sized white kit from the gurney. He put a pillow under the boy's head and took over from the guard.

Cecil stood, turning to Allen. "Won't even need no stitches, but he's out like a light—an' look at his wrist." It was limp, discolored a reddish purple. Cecil started to walk away. "You got kids comin' in here now?"

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“No, this is my prep.”

Cecil began shooing away gawking students from the door. Singh finished checking Del, then he hand-signalized to the other attendant with a you-can-stay-back motion. Someone laughed in the hall—it was the school nurse, not one of the kids. The guard returned to Allen.

“What’s going on out there, Cecil?”

“Ol’ Ernie’s jus’ hittin’ on her again.”

As Cecil walked off, calling on his radio, Allen watched Singh tape a fresh dressing to Del’s head and start a temporary splint to stabilize the wrist. “How’s he doing?”

The attendant responded while securing the boy’s arm. “I am strictly first-aid, sir.” His precise English had a melodious accent.

“Can’t you just tell me what you think?”

Singh stood, signaling to the other attendant again, then he turned to Allen. “Well, the cut is minor, but the wrist is not good. He is starting to chatter, but his eyes are not reacting much. The main concern will likely be concussion.”

“Is he ready to go?”

“Yes.” Singh glanced at his partner, who was still schmoozing with the nurse. Allen pointed at the door. “Does that guy know?”

Singh nodded, closing his eyes momentarily. “Mister Shaw is my supervisor, sir.”

Allen hurried right for the door; as he got there, he took a good look at Shaw, about five-nine, stocky, clean-cut, and pushing forty. He had fancy insignias on his uniform and two name tags. The ambulance badge had: SHAW, ERNIE, and the other one: PO2 E. SHAW, MEDIC, U.S. COAST GUARD RESERVE.

“The boy’s ready,” Allen said. It sounded like an order.

Shaw leered at the nurse’s cocooned rear end, swaying as she walked off in low heels. “That right, teach? Don’t get your pencils in a tizzy.” The nurse giggled from down the hall. “See you later, babe.” Shaw smirked and walked right by Allen into the room. His beginning-to-recede brown butch was thick enough in back to show the remains of a greasy ’50s ducktail.

Cecil returned to the doorway. “Nick says they already caught the Crawford kid at Grant lookin’ for his brother. I need the particulars of the fight.”

While the attendants lifted Del onto the gurney, Allen tried to be succinct with his account. He stopped talking to watch them wheel his semi-conscious student out into the hall. He and Cecil followed them at a distance.

“When Ronnie stepped on him, did Del let go a’ the knife?”

“Yes.” Allen watched Schultz come to the top of the stairs. They retracted the gurney’s legs, and the principal went downstairs ahead of the attendants.

“So Ronnie didn’t need to shove ’im down the second time?”

“No, but . . .” Allen explained again.

“Between all that and runnin’ off, he’s in big trouble.”

Damn—my fault.



Allen went down to the office at noon to find out about Del and Ronnie, but there wasn’t anyone around with new information. He was also hoping to talk to Sandra before period seven, but she didn’t show up. After class, he spoke to Charmane in the hall. “Do you know what happened to Sandra last period?”

“I didn’t want to tell you in front of the kids—she had to go see Melissa at lunch time.”

“Is the baby okay?”

“I think so. I’m going to see them now.”

“Do you think Sandra would mind if you told me what the problem is?”

“Maybe she should tell you, Mister Greene.”

“Okay, we’ll see you tomorrow.” He locked the door, then hurried downstairs; Deniker was coming up. It was the first time Allen had been near him since Monday’s fight. “Mister Deniker.” The guard walked right by, his eyes straight ahead.

Miss Watson was handling all of the end-of-day turmoil alone. She told Allen that Mister Schultz had just called his room. He walked past the principal’s open window and knocked on his door jamb.

“Mister Greene, we meet again.” Schultz was standing by his exterior window. He turned from Allen to look through the thick wire at something going on outside. “Come in please,” he said, facing him again. Schultz’s jowls sagged more than before, his eyes darker in their sockets, and his frame was so

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slouched that he didn't seem as tall.

"I was on my way down when you called. How's Del doing?"

"He has a broken wrist and a slight concussion, but he'll be released from the hospital soon." He looked out again.

Allen sighed. "Jesus."

Schultz turned to him, frowning. "It could've been worse. So, you told Cecil that Ronnie Crawford's part in all this started out as self-defense."

"That's right."

The principal took yet another peek outside, then sat at his desk. "Okay, let's hear the whole thing."

Allen sat down and told him about fouling up the match-ups, then the details of the fight. ". . . and I could tell that Ronnie was upset about what happened to Del."

Schultz nodded. "Okay, here's the deal. With his history, Del will be expelled for starting all this and pulling that knife. Ronnie's going to be suspended for ten school days."

"What, why so long?" The question came out louder and more forceful than Allen expected.

"You need to calm down, Mister Greene."

"Yeah, sorry."

"It didn't help that when they caught him at Grant, Ronnie had two live twenty-two shells in his pocket." Schultz pursed his lips. "You seem to have a lot of interest in the boy."

"He's basically a good kid, one of my best writers."

"Well, if he does all his make-up work and stays out of trouble after he comes back, he should be okay for next year. Sounds like he has some potential."

Allen nodded, sighing from deep in his chest.

"By the way," the principal said, "I finally spoke to Deniker."

"Yeah, I could tell."

"Mister Godina and I will have our eyes on him." Schultz glanced outside, then faced Allen again. "This is the third or fourth time you've ended up in the middle of things, Mister Greene. Why do you suppose that is?"

"I don't know. I screwed up this time."

"Perhaps." He took a glimpse of Allen's slightly mussed long black hair, then his colorful madras shirt. "Tell me something. Did you come to this

Los Angeles, 1968

school motivated by some sort of, shall we say, idealism?”

“What do you mean?”

“We sometimes get young crusaders who ride in here on a white stallion to save the world.”

“No, I needed a job. I didn’t think I’d last *this* long.”

“I see. So how do you feel about it now?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure. I like working with most of the kids, but there are a few who still scare the crap—uh, I try not to show it.”

Schultz made one of his deeply rutted smiles. “Well, I’ll be honest too. You surprised me, Mister Greene—first by gravitating to Mrs. Morgan for some guidance.”

“That wasn’t hard to figure out.”

“Yes, and I also think you’re already starting to find a good balance between caring and practicality—something a lot of teachers never learn.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“That’s fine.” Schultz nodded, smiling again. “Just keep it up.”

What? “Uh, thanks.” He left, making a cursory wave to Miss Watson before entering the hall. Regardless of Schultz’s compliment, only the students, Monique, and maybe Miss Dorsey had any idea of what took place in his room after the doors were shut. The stairway made him flash back to a recent popular movie where Sidney Poitier led all of his tough kids to the Promised Land of education. *Yeah, not in the real world.*

Schultz briefly reported Del's expulsion and Ronnie's suspension during the regular faculty meeting on Thursday afternoon. The meeting lasted until a few minutes after their contracted time; most teachers hurried out as soon as it finished. Monique went over to Mrs. Berg, so Allen walked out of the north exit alone. Frank Williamson caught up to him; they had spoken briefly just twice in the two weeks since the meeting about Sandra.

He looked at Allen seriously. "Greene, I need to talk to you about Ronnie."

Allen stopped. "Yeah, I have him twice."

"I know, would you get his first week's work to Mrs. Berg or me as soon as you can?" He wore the same button on his pocket; Allen had figured out it was a photo of Rosa Parks.

"First thing tomorrow morning."

"Good. So how did Ronnie's fight come down?"

"Wish I had it to do again." Allen filled him in on the main details. They stopped at the barren kiva as he finished, staring at the lone struggling *arborvitae* in the hard ground. Allen kicked a pebble halfway across the coliseum.

Williamson raised a brow. "You look pretty low."

The pot calling the kettle black—geez, Allen. "He's a good kid, and can he ever write."

"Too bad he didn't back off after he stopped the knife."

"Yeah, something was brewing before it started—should've followed my damn hunch."

"Did Del say anything about Ronnie's baldness?"

“Yes, before the fight. Why?”

“There’s something about Ronnie that nobody knows.” He squinted slightly, his face turning even more intense. “I’ll tell you, but you’ve got to keep it to yourself.”

“Of course.”

Williamson put his orange and black notebook on the wall. “How much do you know about his family?”

“Not much. I’ve been to the house once.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Why would I kid about that?”

“Can you tell me why you were there?” After Allen told him the circumstances of the home visit, Williamson raised both brows. “I’ll be.”

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s good you got your butt outta there.”

“Yeah, then I stepped in it—literally.” Williamson gave him a curious look, so Allen explained, then watched him laugh at the dog poop story. “Glad to provide some entertainment,” he said, but it was good to see a smile on the man’s face.

“Somebody probably took pictures.” Williamson laughed one more time. “Sorry, you win the gold medal just for goin’ to that house.” He exhaled, then lost his smile as quickly as pulling down a shade. “Ronnie’s the last of four boys. You met the one who goes to Grant—he’s in one of the big new gangs. The other guy you heard is the oldest—in and out of jail, mostly in. Anyway, their dad went here, and he was all-city football at Grant—a hero to us when we were kids. He was a drill sergeant, died years ago in a boot camp accident. Mrs. Crawford moved back here to her mother’s—the good thing is they have government health insurance for Ronnie.”

“What? There’s something wrong with him?”

“Yeah, that’s the secret. Leukemia—over a year now.”

“My God, that’s why he’s bald?”

Williamson nodded. “He pretends to keep his hair like that on purpose. He thinks it’s less conspicuous than wearing a hat or something—doesn’t want any pity.”

“What’s his prognosis?”

“This is secondhand from his brother, Rob, an eighth-grader. They told

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the family that Ronnie would've had no chance five years ago. Now there's a new chemotherapy that uses multiple drugs—some kids are surviving, so he has a shot.”

Allen stared at the asphalt. “Is the school aware of it?”

“No, Ronnie told his mom the kids would find out, said he'd stop coming. Rob isn't a tough kid—he's worried about Ronnie and let me in on it last fall.”

“Man, one minute they're just kids, then you find out—”

“No, they're still just kids.” He paused. “Your neighborhood has all the same things we do—drunks to VD to domestic violence. Maybe you don't have as much, but we don't hide it so effectively, and you don't have poverty as an excuse.”

Allen let that sink in a few seconds, thinking of Rick.

Williamson lifted his binder. “The point is, there's no sense blaming yourself for the fight. It was probably inevitable.”

“Yeah, maybe.” They started off toward the south archway. “I wish there was some way for Ronnie to keep up his poetry.”

“Then do it.”

“How?”

“Send some extra assignments with Rob, I'll arrange it.”

“All right, I'll put it with his homework. Thanks.”

“Forget it.”

As they entered the building, he felt like talking more to Williamson but just watched him walk off to his room. Allen went in the hall entrance to the office, removed a thick pile of mail from his box, and then started for the staff lounge, hesitating at the door. The week before, he overheard two teachers at the coffee pot, gossiping viciously about Monique and Mrs. Berg. Passing by the next day to make copies, Allen heard Van Burton speaking half under his breath to some appreciative laughter: “I never had so damn many dumb jungle bunnies.”

Most teachers were likely gone now, so Allen went in. Two women chatted quietly at the sink as he sat on one of the plush sofas for only the third or fourth time. He began to sort through his boring mail; the two teachers left, but three more walked in moments later—Nash, Anders, and Mister Jackson, a short thin man who was the Social Studies chairman.

About Monique's age, Jackson always wore a brown suit, tie, belt, and shoes; his complexion was very dark, but his receding hair, tuft of moustache

and brows were white. In one faculty meeting, Jackson had made a snobbish comment about some of his “fellow Negroes,” but Williamson interrupted, saying “And some of my *fellow* blacks are the dupes of Jim Crow mentality.”

Like imprinted goslings, Anders and Jackson followed Nash to a far couch, oblivious of Allen. Nash put his ever-present briefcase on a side table as he sat down. Anders turned, speaking just low enough to keep her voice in the room. “. . . and with both of them as finalists, we have to be more certain.”

“That’s right.” Jackson was quieter than the librarian. “I’d take the guy from Verdugo Hills over *him*.”

Godina. Allen started to sort faster as Anders responded.

“. . . and he doesn’t know our old hoodlums or any of the family traits—he probably doesn’t *want* to know.”

Nash spoke to his lackeys with a condescending grin. “The margin is still close, but I’m not very concerned. Just to be sure, I’ll bring around one more vote, God willing.”

Anders gnashed her perfect white teeth. “Can you imagine having someone in charge who would be even easier on the troublemakers?”

Jackson nodded. “If *he* was in charge today, it would’ve been detention for the Crawford boy—as it is, he should’ve been expelled.”

Goddamn it. “Excuse me, do you always hold private conversations in public?”

Nash eyed him with one brow raised as if Allen were an armchair that didn’t belong in the room. “Mister Greene, you don’t need to listen, and we’re not saying anything that isn’t common knowledge to *most* members of this faculty, be they temporary or not.”

“Is that right?” Allen stood and pointed at them. “You don’t know a damn thing about Ronnie Crawford.” *Easy.* He exhaled, picking up his mail.

Scoffing, Anders looked at him over the rims of her black glasses. “And *you* do? Who do you think you are?”

“Just somebody passing through, I guess.” Walking out, Allen saw Nash sneer at him; the other two were sniggering. Instead of going upstairs, he turned right and walked off slowly, trying to calm down. He stopped at a fountain for a drink, then splashed water on his face and took a couple of deep breaths before he continued down the hall. Williamson’s light was on; Allen saw him through the portal, reading at his desk.

He knocked, and then heard, “Yeah, come in.” Allen entered his room

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for the first time. The walls were a gallery of civil rights and Black History posters—each with a caption covered by a flap. He spotted Rosa Parks, Doctor King, Malcom X, and a frenzied John Brown—the others weren't as familiar.

Williamson pushed his open book an inch or two away. "What's up?"

"Hi." Approaching him, Allen recognized Harriet Tubman on another poster. "So this way, they learn the faces first?"

"That's about it." The poster nearest his desk was of an older black man, studying something through the wire spectacles on his large pointed nose; he wore some sort of apron. Williamson placed a marker and closed his book. "Know him?"

"No, but he looks a lot like Gandhi."

"Hm, I guess he does. Take a look."

Allen lifted the flap and skimmed the biography of the agricultural scientist. "Yeah, he was in our history book, but Carver obviously did more than peanuts."

Williamson nodded.

"And now I know. Can I talk to you a minute, Frank?"

"Go ahead."

"I just ran into to Nash, Jackson, and Anders."

"Man, you stepped in it again." A crease of a grin crossed his face.

"Yeah." Allen told him about the confrontation.

"Welcome to Warren J. Harding. Jackson fought against the Black History class until the district supported it, then he wanted to teach it, but Schultz came through." He paused, glancing at George Washington Carver. "Next year, Moto will give it to Jackson."

"Are you that sure she's in?"

He turned to Allen. "Sharon Berg is on the interview panel. From what she told me, Nash can back up his boast. The final interviews are next Tuesday."

Allen sighed. "So if she gets it, Nash will have even more say around here."

"Maybe, but we have cut into their majority this year."

"Who exactly is *we*?"

"There are two teachers' organizations, the Alliance and our local. They're ashamed of words like *union*, and their so-called action is usually about salaries, hardly a word about education or the kids."

"So Nash just transferred in and took it over?"

“Yup, two and a half years ago—elected three-to-one over Miss Dorsey. They got just what they wanted.”

“I suppose his reputation for discipline adds to his credibility with some teachers.”

Frank scoffed. “That’s about right, but he doesn’t even deal with tough kids in class. When he does get one, Nash just moves the kid down from level three.”

“How can he get away with that?”

“The demotion and promotion committee is Moto, Mister Lee, both counselors, and Nash—three votes against two.”

“God, poor Mrs. Berg. What’s this business about the older kids thinking Nash is dangerous?”

He glowered out of his window at the quiet street. “That’s been part of the school’s culture ever since he came here.”

“I’ve seen how some kids avoid him—why do they believe it?”

His face still cross, Frank turned. “All right, most of what I’m going to tell you is common knowledge to anyone who’s been here for a while—but I still don’t want any of it passed on with my name.”

“Monique’s the only one I really talk to.”

“She knows all of this. Okay, what you’ve seen and heard about the *dangerous* Mister Nash comes from the myth that he carries a gun in that damn briefcase of his.”

“What? You’re joking.”

“Nope. He started the rumor himself when he came here, but I can’t prove it.”

“Nobody on staff believes there’s actually a gun, right?”

“No, but it doesn’t matter what we believe, the rumor just goes on. A few parents have come in, but it always blows over.”

“How do you know Nash intentionally started it?”

“Secondhand.” He turned toward John Brown and his frizzled hair, then back to Allen. “Okay, this is the part that *isn’t* common knowledge: Nash’s first year, two boys came and told me in confidence that he joked around with them, saying it might not be a bad idea to carry a Luger around in his briefcase.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, doesn’t sound like much. I told them it was ridiculous, but the

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rumor just spread and keeps getting passed down that he's crazy and packs a gun. Schultz told me it would be Nash's word against mine unless I gave up the names of those boys, which I didn't."

"Did Schultz do anything?"

"Watched him for a while, all Nash did was add his thing with the silver chain. Takes his briefcase outside with him to the coliseum—the sly bastard just shakes the chain and grins—the kids get the point."

"I heard some teachers joking about the briefcase."

"Yeah, a lot of them think it's real funny—a running sick joke to the rest of us. Nash laughs at it too, then he'll turn serious and say that all he carries in there is 'the power of the Lord, the Holy Bible.' When the kids asked me about it back then, I made the mistake of talking about myth and rumor, using historical examples—ended up making it worse. Now when they ask, I just say the gun thing is baloney, and then move on."

"So Ishimoto didn't know about those two boys coming to you?"

"Schultz kept his word, never told her. She would've twisted it into something against me."

"Why did you let me in on it?"

"You asked, and you're already on her shit-list anyway."



After the homeroom tardy bell the next morning, Allen felt guilty again for his relief when he marked Rupert absent. He also missed Ronnie already, but not just because of the tutoring and his good writing. The boy had a salutary effect on first and last period—the kids seemed to respect Ronnie because he could pull off being both a tough kid and a good student.

Although dreary Mondays were the norm at Marshall, it turned out that Fridays were not about gleeful anticipation for the weekend; instead, it was the day that both the staff and students expected trouble. Allen finished homeroom attendance, then checked the coliseum. An older boy had jogged by him during duty, pointing back at Nash while yelling ahead to some others, "Not yet, it's too close to that ol' fucker." Allen stopped the boy, but Cecil showed up on rounds and took over as the bell rang.

Announcements finished, and Allen turned away from the window. His

peripheral vision picked up some movement, so he turned back and looked below again. Two tall male teens sprinted by and hurdled the iron rails, stopping at an old wooden shed where the student clubs sold popcorn and candy at noon. Spotting a flame in one boy's hand, Allen hurried over to the intercom and pushed the button. Static came on right away, and then Venable. "Office."

"Two big guys with lighters are at the popcorn stand!" Before she answered, most of his boys rushed to the windows.

"Yes, the cooks just reported it—security's on the way." The PA sputtered off; Allen returned to the window and saw the two teens fleeing past the eucalyptus in the eating area. A pyrotechnic fountain of sparks burst from the booth's counter; the homeroom boys *oohed* and *aahed* as if it were the Fourth of July. The dry plywood caught fire right away.

He slid the window all the way up. A heavy cook in a powder-blue uniform shuffled out of the cafeteria with a small red extinguisher that she couldn't get to work, but Cecil was arriving with a larger one. Allen started to shout down to ask if he should call for more help, but they wouldn't hear him over the *FLOOOOOF* that spouted from the nozzle in Cecil's hands.

The booth, now a mass of flames, sent thick dark-grey smoke drifting above the school for the second time since Allen came to Marshall, though the first fire was from a trashcan. His boys jabbered excitedly as Cecil took the precaution to douse some cypress trees by the cafeteria. Godina and two cooks stood with a few kids near the kiva and watched the fire begin to burn itself out as a siren approached.

The firemen hurried through the south archway, but not with hoses; they soaked the embers using extinguishers, then poked around gingerly in the debris. After a delayed passing bell sounded, the homeroom boys left reluctantly. Those who would have first period with Allen remained at the windows as Charmane and some other girls entered from Monique's room.

While most kids rushed over to the windows, Charmane came to Allen, frowning. "Sandra's out today." She paused and lowered her voice. "She said I could tell you why."

"Okay, hang on." When the bell rang, he faced all the kids at the windows. "All right, everybody has something exciting to write about. You can stay over there *if* you're writing." All of them except two boys hurried to retrieve their folders. Allen warned those two about isolation; they went over to the file boxes.

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He met Charmane near the front door, far from all the kids, but she still spoke quietly. "Sandra wanted to come bad today, Mister Greene, but she had to watch the baby."

Allen kept his voice just as low. "What about her mother?"

"That's the problem, she was drunk again yesterday morning. She told Sandra to stay home, and they got in a big fight. That's when Sandra usually takes Melissa to her aunt's, but she's visiting family in Atlanta. Sandra called at noon, and there was no answer, so she ran all the way home and found her mom passed out. The baby was asleep, all dirty, and—"

"What, Charmane?"

She started to tear up a little. "Melissa had bruises. I guess she got knocked around when she wouldn't stop crying. Mrs. Small was drinking again today, so Sandra stayed home."

"God, who could blame her? Charmane, I have to tell Mrs. Berg what happened."

"What if they take Melissa away from Sandra?"

"I hope not, but the baby is defenseless when Sandra's not there. She gets along with Mrs. Berg, right?"

"Yeah, Sandra likes her."

"Good. I'll go see her next period and explain everything. Mrs. Berg might want to talk to you."

"Okay, Mister Greene. I hope this is the right thing to do."

"I think it is, Charmane."

Mrs. Berg was meeting with some parents; Allen didn't get to talk to her until halfway through period two. She was already very aware of Sandra's situation but mildly surprised about the alleged abuse of the baby. Mrs. Berg thanked Allen for getting involved and said she would report the incident and visit Sandra's house right away.

The fire was followed by a hectic, unruly day in Allen's classes with more than the usual number of kids not ready to settle down. He expected that the fire marshal or a cop would talk to him, but he heard later that a cook had identified two former students, now sought for arson.

After school, Allen drove to his bank in Atwater and moved most of his meager savings into the checking account. He stopped at Bill's to grab a bite and call Trudy to tell her he was eating out again. Sipping a beer, Allen considered where he could afford to live that wasn't too close to Rick or too far from his sister, maybe the somewhat crummy neighborhoods south of his high-school's district.

He drove from Atwater up into the hills on the old bridge they used as background for so many movies. A few miles past Adams, he searched blocks of semi-rundown apartments and duplexes for an hour or so, then found a FOR RENT sign for an unfurnished third-floor studio in a brick building with a cracked, red-tile roof. It took another hour and a half to find the owner and see the place; it had one good-sized room, a bath, and two big closets. He paid the deposit and a month's rent using almost every dollar to his name, then drove back down to Bill's to call Dan about helping him move.

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After eleven, he tried to tiptoe past Pedro to go down to his bed, but Trudy had forgotten to put on the cage cover. The parakeet woke up with a screech, then he squawked more and said, “Pedro boy, Pedro boy, Pedro . . .”

“I fuckin’ just got to sleep.” Rick stood at the door in his briefs. “I’m throwin’ that goddamn bird out.”

Allen faced him from in front of the cage. “You aren’t going to touch him.”

“You gonna stop me, fat-ass?”

Trudy shuffled into the dining room toward Rick in her blue terry-cloth bathrobe. “Just shut up and go back to bed.”

“You’re not talkin’ to me like that,” Rick said with a snarl.

Allen detached the cage from the stand. “Stop, I’m taking him for good, right now.”

Trudy came closer. “In the middle of the night? Where?”

“I rented an apartment.”

Rick walked away. “Bitchin’—sooner the better,” he said, leaving the dining room.

Allen put Pedro’s cage down and faced Trudy. “Dan’s helping me move tomorrow—a place near City College.”

“Why so soon, Allen?”

He scowled toward their bedroom. “Why do you think?”

“He’s extra cranky because I disgust him and he’s not getting any.”

“Jesus, Trudy, I don’t want to hear about that. I wouldn’t be so sure he wasn’t . . .”

“You know something I don’t?”

He picked up the cage. “No.”

“Then maybe you need to shut up, too.”

“Yeah, maybe so.” He walked away with the bird, then stopped. “I’m staying downstairs tonight after I take him.” He sighed. “I’ll only be twenty minutes away after I move. I want you to call me if, um, you ever need anything.”

“Get on with your life, Allen. Don’t worry about me.”

“See you in the morning.” He went outside and had to wipe away a couple of tears before he drove away.

With the help of Dan’s station wagon and a half-case of beer, by the next afternoon they finished moving his larger possessions—books, records, a portable stereo, some brick-and-plank shelves, an old dinette set Trudy didn’t want, his hide-a-bed, and a small TV. Allen moved his clothes and the rest

in the Volvo, then on Sunday spent a few hours on lesson plans and student papers before he began to unpack, talking to Pedro.



Defying the old adage about the lion, the approach of March in L.A. was more like a warm grey lamb, causing early spring fever among Marshall's students and adding to the leftover buzz about the demise of the popcorn stand. Absenteeism was on the rise, and the usual Monday gloom lost out to excitement over an apparently brutal fight before school behind the gym.

In his classes, more readers had volunteered to be tutors, making the match-ups go even better, regardless of so many antsy kids. After school, Allen sat down to evaluate the new program, but he also needed to see Mrs. Berg—Sandra was absent again, and Charmane didn't know why. He went down to the office; the counselor was out, so he looked up Sandra's phone number but decided not to call until he spoke to Mrs. Berg.

Back in the room, he took out his lists and estimated that for almost a third of the tutored kids the approach was working like finding a lost key—something clicked, and they were reading. About another third struggled but slowly progressed, some eagerly. Allen tried not to be discouraged by the rest, more than twenty who weren't getting anywhere. About half of those kids were making an effort—the others, his most aggressive or sullen students, usually refused to recite. As for the tutors, most of them seemed to show improved skills with their own work.

Allen went out to Monique's door, knocked and entered. She greeted him from her desk, where she was sorting papers. Pinned to a clothesline from door to door, there were about twenty-five watercolor washes of orange or red sunsets—a few had blue skies made somber with grey streaks. Every horizon had objects etched in black silhouette—rooftops, telephone poles, aials, billboards, water tanks; one had the Watts Towers and a tree.

“Those are amazing, Monique.”

“Didn't they do well? They really got the idea of mixing colors to create a mood.”

They chatted more about the silhouettes, then he sighed and told her about the first results of his literacy efforts.

“Allen, don't be so down. Progress by that many kids is wonderful, and I

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have another suggestion for your new readers.” She said they could illustrate each page, make a book, and read the new entries to an adult at home. “After all, they’re mostly twelve and thirteen-year-olds, and many of them love to draw—another incentive to read.”

“Good idea.”

“What else is bothering you, *chéri*?”

He made a slight grin. “Is this intuition in action?”

“No, you’re pretty easy to read.”

“That’s what Trudy says.” He sighed again. “Yeah, one thing is I haven’t been able to get in touch with Mrs. Berg to find out about Sandra.”

“Sharon has been swamped, but I think she went over there again today on her way downtown. You do realize she probably can’t tell you everything that’s going on?”

“That’s fine, I just want something to get resolved so Sandra doesn’t get behind again.”

“Sharon’s going to be out until Thursday, but I’m sure she’ll tell you what she can when she gets back. My guess is that you’ll see Sandra tomorrow.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“So what else is going on, Allen?”

He told her about his move to the small apartment.

“Sounds like a *lofty* new place.”

He smiled at her pun. “Yeah, it’s good to be out of that damn basement.”

Her face turned more serious. “Allen, is being on your own going to be a difficult adjustment for you?”

“Are you thinking about my jungle story?”

“In a way, I guess. What motivated the sudden move?”

“That would be Rick the Prick.” He tried not to bore her with too many details. “. . . so that’s the deal—Dan helped me take my stuff over.”

“You and Trudy seem pretty close, regardless of him.”

“Yeah, it would help us both if I figured out what I want to do with myself.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m excited about your teaching, Allen, and you’re dealing pretty well some of our, uh, more challenging staff members.”

“You and Dan helped a lot with that. He thinks I’m too much of a loner, especially with females my age.”

"I hope I didn't discourage you with Linda."

"You didn't. I don't think she's into the kooky religious stuff, but getting to know her probably isn't in the cards."

"I don't see why not, but that's none of my business."

He and Monique talked a little more "shop," then left together before dark. That night, Pedro seemed especially excited, chattering crazily and mixing up his wolf whistle with "Reveille" again. Allen carried the cage and stand to the studio's only large window; he slid it open so Pedro could enjoy some air. A nearby tall jacaranda was already in lavender bloom, its sweet perfume wafting through the screen.

"Nice, huh, boy? But no birds for you to talk to yet." Pedro hopped right over to his owner's lips at the side of the cage. Allen repeated the *puddy tat* refrain several times before he stopped. "Sorry, ol' bird, that's it." Pedro danced, then went into his *I'm a chicken* routine as Allen began to arrange the small apartment.

As Monique predicted, Sandra was back on Tuesday, preoccupied with making up the work in all of her classes. She had a new look—jeans, a flowery blouse, and a wide red ribbon like a hippie headband around her new short Afro. She didn't say anything to Allen that day or the next about the situation with her mother and the baby.

On Thursday, the last day of leap-year February, they let school out one period early for a two-hour teachers' in-service. On the way to the meeting, Allen and Monique were starting into the coliseum from the north archway. It was so hot that the black macadam stuck a little to the soles of his hiking shoes.

Adjusting the purse on her shoulder, Monique led him toward the afternoon shade by the kiva. "So, did you see Sharon about Sandra?"

"No, but Sandra seems okay. I'd still like to talk to Sharon—maybe after this meeting."

"She'll be there. We still have a couple of minutes." She rested her purse on the kiva wall; some teachers crossed the south archway to the cafeteria. "How's the new place?"

"Still a mess. My bird seems to like it."

"Pedro, right? Tell me another one of his lines."

Allen smiled. "Okay, he does Chester, cowboy twang and all—*Howdy, Mister Dillon.*"

"Priceless, I've got to meet him."

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“We’ll have to take care of that.”

“Allen, remember the other day when you were talking about being a loner? Well, in some ways, so am I. Sharon and Greg are my only real friends here in the over-fifty crowd. As you know, I’m not above a self-serving acquaintance or two, but I don’t get along very well with my generation.” She made a rare sigh. “We get a lot of credit because of World War II, some of it deserved, but now a lot of us are just part of the problem.”

He smiled and put one foot up on the short wall.

“What, *chéri*?”

“You’re young at heart, but not like that corny old song.”

“Well, thank you.” Her fair face blushed a bit. “Allen, you said Dan is the only childhood friend you’ve stuck with. Do you want to tell me about that?”

He exhaled, just audibly, and leaned an elbow on his raised knee. “Trudy’s the only one I ever explained this to.”

“If you don’t feel like—”

“No, it’s okay.” He waited for a teacher to hurry by, then told her about his parents dying in a freeway crash. “. . . and after that, it was pretty simple—my other so-called buddies vanished, and my girlfriend dropped me cold. Not Dan, he was there for all of it—the funeral, everything, although I was pretty messed up. I’ll always be grateful to him.” He felt pressure around his eyes. She picked up her purse, and they ambled toward the archway.

“Between Dan and your sister, I think you probably have more quality relationships than most people do.”

Locking his jaw, he managed not to tear up before smiling back at her. “Yeah, maybe so, but I think I have another good friend now.”

“I feel the same way, *amour*.”

They approached the entrance behind a few other teachers. She squeezed his elbow, and he patted Monique’s hand before she let go. Allen reached for the cafeteria door and pulled the handle. “It’s back to the fun and games. Do you have any idea what they have planned for us?”

“Yes, get ready for some fireworks.”

Just inside the door, Ishimoto stood at attention in a Burgundy suit. The vice-principal turned to Allen, her seething black eyes saying, *You’re late*. She ask-ordered him to sit with his department, then made a fleeting smile to Monique.

Eight or nine tables were interspersed throughout the long room this time, each one at least fifteen feet from the next. The window sliders were all pushed up several inches for some air. Monique and Allen approached Godina, who was sitting at a center table with Nash, Dorsey, Latham, and a pale thin elderly man in very thick glasses—Mister Rawlings, a recently hired long-term sub, like Allen. Frank, in his usual denim, was also sitting with them for some reason, grading papers. Nearly all of the other men nearby were in shirtsleeves, but Nash was wearing his coat, the enigmatic briefcase at his side.

Dorsey spoke with Godina while Nash held court for Rawlings and Latham, who had a powder-blue notebook with gold UCLA script. Monique was drawn unwillingly into Nash's diatribe, so Allen sat across from Frank. Two elderly English teachers—Allen met them once at another meeting—sat together nearby, whispering. Mrs. York and Miss Jorgensen both wore puffy-shouldered granny gowns, seemingly pleased that the style was in vogue again.

His face blank and drawn, Schultz stood alone in a light-grey summer suit at a microphone near the kitchen. "All right folks, let's get started." He didn't look up; it was difficult to tell if he was serious, angry, or both.

Several more teachers hurried in; Cecil entered from the narrow hall by the kitchen and began speaking quietly to Schultz. Ishimoto, now sitting with the PE department, sneered at some tardy teachers.

"Thanks, Cecil." Schultz's voice was picked up by the microphone before he faced the faculty. "Marv is out today, so Cecil checked the cars and found his own windows broken." A wave of grumbling passed through the cafeteria. Two men stood, reaching for their keys. Schultz raised an arm. "Let's just relax—Cecil's watching the lot until we're finished here."

Unlike previous meetings, he spoke right over some carping. "Here's the plan for the two hours today. Miss Dorsey, Mister Lee, Mrs. Berg, and I have put together four questions about racial tension at Marshall for you to respond to, discuss, and—"

Amidst some grumbling, Nash had jumped to his feet, not waiting to be recognized. "Mister Schultz, the Alliance was not consulted about scheduling this now. Perhaps we should work in our curriculum groups instead, and save a long-term issue such as this for the new principal." Nash bowed slightly toward Ishimoto and the PE teachers.

Frank, chin on chest, shook his head. Schultz's face had reddened during

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Nash's interruption, then the principal bristled toward the mike. "Mister Nash, I've already made it clear what we *will* be discussing today. You are welcome to comment again if it relates to the topic at hand." The audience hushed while Nash muttered and sat down like Elmer Fudd with a squiggly black line over his head.

"The four of us plus the vice-principals and Mister Fogle will serve as moderators to assist with the discussion and your reports. The last question concerns recommendations—we hope to address those in our next meeting."

Some teachers groaned again as Schultz checked his watch. "Let's begin. No scheduled breaks—if you need the facilities, just go. Okay, moderators get with your groups please."

Schultz headed for the Social Studies table; Godina shed his dark-blue suit coat and began passing out dittoed pages that smelled of purple mimeo ink, tangy and cool. Dorsey had already gone; she approached the coliseum windows to work with the math department, which made it one black teacher in each of the seven groups. Allen looked around for Mrs. Berg and saw her sitting a couple of tables away, leading the science teachers.

While Godina passed out the last papers, Allen spoke softly to Frank. "So, are you here to replace Dorsey?"

"Yeah, I'm your token—she really got the short straw with that bunch." He looked across the room at Dorsey, then turned back. "At least I got away from Jackson. Hold on to your hat, it's time to raise a little hell."

The vice-principal faced the group, extra handouts in hand. “So two absent—let’s all read this please.” A minute or so later he said, “Okay, you have room to take notes on there. I’ll be reporting on what we come up with for the first topic—our definition of prejudice in general.”

Nash’s left elbow brushed the table, rattling his chain. “We are not sociologists, what is the purpose of teachers—”

“Mister Nash, you are welcome to sit this question out if you like.” Godina turned to the others. “Who has some ideas to get us going?”

As Nash pouted, York and Jorgenson huddled. Frank was the first to speak, glancing over at Dorsey’s group. “I think Miss Dorsey’s workshop from last fall gave us a way to define prejudice.” He turned to Godina. “How about unfounded or unwarranted negative *expectations* about another group of people?”

Monique looked at Frank. “Yes, expectations based on race or economic class, also gender, um . . .”

Thinking of Charmane and Ronnie, Allen brought up disability, then all but Nash, Rawlings, and Latham came up with more additions to the list: culture, education, religion, old age, intelligence. Latham’s thin plain face flushed a little. “I’m not sure, but, uh, what about physical appearance?”

The group, awkwardly silent, turned to Godina. “Yes, very true. Okay, here’s what we have.” He summarized the definition and examples. “Are we all okay with this for now?”

Godina glanced at the brooding Nash, then at Rawlings, whose eyelids sagged heavily. “All right, second question—list specific examples of racial

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bias between general groups of people here at the school. Mister Williamson agreed to report on this one.” The vice-principal turned to him.

“How about you, Mister *Godina*?” Frank said his surname in Spanish. “Have you experienced racial bias from students here?”

Nash’s globular face contorted into a snarl. “Mister Williamson, it is apparent why you are with our group—maybe you could confine your comments to racial issues at *this* school.”

“Is this discussion exclusively about Negroes and Caucasians?” Facing Godina, Frank pronounced the words, *KNEE-grows* and *COCK-kasians*.

Godina winced slightly at the sarcasm. “No, it isn’t, but I haven’t experienced a whole lot of racial animosity from the students here.” He made a faint benevolent smile.

Frank stared at him. “C’mon, Ricardo, an example.”

“Mister Godina,” Nash said *gub-DYE-nub*, “you don’t have to tell us—”

“No, he’s right. We need to identify all the examples we can.” Godina paused. “Yes, a few students have referred to me with racial slurs, but they usually don’t say them directly.”

“Which still didn’t feel so great,” Frank said.

“Of course not.” Godina almost sounded brusque.

Frank was still looking right at the vice-principal. “If you don’t mind, what slur did they use—*spick*?”

Godina wrinkled his nose slightly, as if he were a boy hearing his mother cuss for the first time. “That’s one of them, but if they don’t say it to my face, I usually ignore it.”

Frank sighed. “If a kid slurs you behind your back, isn’t that like a teacher slurring students? I think we need to confront that behavior from both kids and staff.”

Nash began to interrupt, but Godina held a hand up to him. “I agree, though sometimes other things are more immediate. I’ll jot that below for later when we discuss recommendations.”

He wrote quickly, then Nash, as if beginning a lecture to a group of inferior fools, raised his chin, adjusted his tie and flicked a speck from his coat. “First, I hardly think Mister Godina needs a lesson, Mister Williamson, on how to deal with name-calling. And when have you *ever* heard a teacher here utter racial slurs?”

Frank finally looked at Nash, his expression cold. "Let's see, the last time . . . maybe a week ago, and you can be damned sure that teacher heard about it from me."

"I don't appreciate your profanity. Are you telling me that he used the, uh, *n-word* in this school?"

"Sure, I've overheard it, but this was a *she*, referring to a fifty-year-old janitor as *boy*—slavery talk."

"Ah, I see." Nash smirked. "If I stopped every time I overheard students say *whitey* or *honky* in my room, I'd never have time to teach. Perhaps you're a bit too sensitive about some of these milder common terms, Mister Williamson."

"Maybe if you stopped to discuss those *common terms*, you'd be teaching something worthwhile." The rising tones made Rawlings sit up, his magnified eyes all the way open.

Nash jeered at Frank. "You have the gall to criti—"

"Okay, enough." Godina patted his forehead with a napkin.

Monique stopped fiddling with a red paper flower on her purse. "I think racial animosity by staff is often subtle, not so overt." Everyone had turned to her. "Frank reminded us how eloquently Miss Dorsey has taught us to *expect* students to succeed. I'll just say that it took much of my career to grow away from my racial bias and at least begin with an expectation that each student will learn."

A scowl and a condescending grin somehow shared Nash's face. He took another glimpse at Monique's chest. "That's all well and good, Mrs. Morgan, but we do have our adopted standards, which you and I have quibbled over at times. The policy states that the curriculum cannot be compromised for the sake of remediation. Our high standards form our expectations."

Frank glared at the table. "As usual, you're not listening. The curriculum is for kids who read and write well. Miss Dorsey and Monique expect *all* students to learn."

Nash loured at Frank as Godina responded. "We can come back for more on racial animosity between staff and students, but let's go on now to other conflicts."

"Yeah, let's." Frank turned to Nash with a menacing glare. "Between teachers."

Nash raised one brow disdainfully. "I suggest you speak for yourself, Mister Williamson."

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“Fine, I’ll admit my racial animosity, but I’d also say that those who deny it the loudest are usually the most racist of all.” His tone was bland. Allen and Monique stifled grins.

Nash clenched his teeth, his face turning red. “I don’t have to sit here and be subjected to these insults.”

Mrs. York turned to him gravely. “Mister Nash, your blood pressure.” Latham made a slight giggle, drawing frowns from York and her spinster friend.

Godina sighed, dabbing his postage-stamp moustache. “Yes, maybe you two could calm down a little. Okay, what other kinds of racial tension?”

Frank tapped his pencil on the papers he had been correcting. “Between students.” Nash groaned; the others waited for an explanation. “Skin color, darker kids making fun of light-skinned kids, and the opposite, which was more common when I was in school.”

Godina kept writing. “Yes, I see that in my culture as well.” He glanced at the clock in the kitchen. “Okay, another one is racial tension between staff and community. Maybe we can discuss examples of that before we make our report. Let’s go on for now to the third question—identifying our own racial prejudices, those of us who think we have them.”

Avoiding eye contact with Nash, Godina wrote for a moment. Rawlings walked off to the steady ant line of teachers going to and from the restrooms. Allen watched Ishimoto pretend to disapprove of some raucous laughter from Van Burton and the other male PE teachers.

Godina took a deep breath. “Mrs. Morgan has agreed to report on this question—I told her I’d start with a story she’s heard before.” He sighed. “I visited my grandmother in Mexico City, the summer of ’59” Godina said she had a going-away party for her boarders, some U.S. college boys. One of them danced with an indigenous girl, a maid, and his grandmother told him not to socialize with *them*. “. . . and the boy angrily left the house. I thought he was wrong, even disrespectful.” Godina sighed again. “After my *abuela* passed away, I came to grips with the idea that she, no, *we* were the ones who were wrong.”

Nearly everyone at the table watched him intently, as if they wanted more of the story. Nash cleared his throat in a high tone intended to announce something important was to follow. “Mister Godina, is it your expectation that each of us must come up with some similar true confession?”

Godina, who never glared, turned to him, his irises glistening like tiny black bombs. “No, Mister Nash, I don’t think there’s anything else you need to say at all.”

Impervious to the conflict, Latham smiled. “I’ll go next. My parents have always had the same Oriental gardener, and I always thought he was poor and uneducated until my mom told me he graduated from college in Korea. My dad said that Mister Hah—that’s his name, H-A-H.” She giggled. “He said Mister Hah will probably have his own business someday with ten men working for him. It’s good that I learned about how industrious and smart they are before I went to UCLA, where we have a lot of Orientals.”

Jesus. “Yeah, many of the Asian kids I grew up with were also top students,” Allen said, and he watched her nod confidently. “But not *all* of them. To be honest, we sometimes spoke of them as *chinks*, *gooks*, and *japs*.” Latham, York and Jorgenson squirmed; Nash shook his head. Allen faced Latham again. “Maybe I’ve gotten over most of that, I don’t know. What I did learn was that their individual cultures are as much different as alike.”

Latham was nonplussed, her thin mouth partly open. Godina broke the silence. “Finished, Mister Greene?”

“No. The girls of Japanese descent in my high school had a reputation with us—we said they were snotty and acted superior.” He glanced at Ishimoto; Frank and Monique made slight smiles. “When I run into someone now who fits our old stereotype, I still have to remind myself that she’s an individual, and no one else deserves to be labeled by her snobbish attitude.”

Nash scowled as if Allen were a sub-species. “Pure double-talk from our secular, so-called *open* generation. It is so typical that you would mock the attitudes of others, and then turn around and bare your own prejudice.”

“Well, Mister Nash, something I’ve been reminded of in my one month here is that prejudice is part of me and my L.A. neighborhood—I’m trying to be aware of it and deal with it, instead of denying it or being on a big guilt trip. If my generation is the first to admit its racial prejudice, then maybe we’re getting somewhere.”

Nash’s jaw tightened more; his eyes narrowed. “Nonsense, and I resent your implication that prejudice is common all over the city. I can’t even remember the last time I heard racial epithets in my neighborhood.”

“Well, I hear them every day in mine—the store, gas station, any damn

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bar.” Allen looked right at him. “Maybe you don’t hear them because they don’t bother you.”

Nash sputtered. “D-don’t you lecture *me*.” He got up, fuming to Godina. “How many more of these testimonials must we endure?” He walked off with his briefcase to the line.

Godina began a review and expansion of their responses to the questions. Nash returned a few minutes later and sulked near Rawlings at the far end of the table.

After Schultz halted the seven groups, he began his report for the Social Studies table. They finished, there was a brief discussion, then Godina volunteered to go next. He took less than a minute to read and explain their definition—Allen saw a rare smile from Dorsey across the room. Frank and Monique summed up the group’s work on the second and third questions.

Schultz praised them for “sincerely addressing the issues.” After discussion, Fogle began to present for the specialists. When they finished, the principal told them they did not take the task seriously enough and had to begin again later. Schultz then lauded Dorsey’s, Lee’s, and Berg’s groups before the final department began—Mrs. Ishimoto and the PE teachers.

They finished quickly, then Schultz censured them like he did Fogle’s group. Ishimoto’s jaw dropped. It was 3:25; the principal said he owed the faculty ten minutes. He dismissed everyone, but Ishimoto was already up, flitting around her table to gather the papers. She began to speak covertly with all of the PE teachers.

Monique and Frank stayed on to chat with Godina. Allen hurried off to catch Mrs. Berg, who had just finished speaking with the science department’s one black teacher. The counselor was in dark slacks and a white, short-sleeve men’s dress shirt. Allen had only been near Mrs. Berg before when she was seated, and he was surprised that she was almost his height.

Her short dark hair was straight and she didn’t use makeup, but a full smile lit up her angular features. “I’m glad you came, Allen. Am I being too familiar? I feel like I know you.”

“Of course not, Mrs. Berg.”

Her narrow face feigned a frown. “It’s Sharon, please. So, about Sandra—shall we walk as we talk?” He nodded; they headed for the south exit, Sharon facing him. “Sandra hasn’t missed school since Monday, right?”

“Right, but she hasn’t said much.”

“That’s not surprising, but she told me she doesn’t mind if I explain her situation to you.”

There were teachers hanging around by the door, inside and out. Sharon led him back toward the north exit. “Sandra cares about her mother, but she thinks of her as two separate people, the sober mom and the alcoholic—no middle ground. As far as I know, this is the first time Mrs. Small has been violent, but Sandra, naturally, no longer trusts her with the baby.”

“Man, that’s a lot to handle for a fourteen-year-old.”

She nodded. “We do have a temporary solution. Protective services is worried about both the baby and Sandra. They’re both staying with the aunt now, and her mother is starting treatment. If she sticks with it, she’ll be able to take Sandra back.”

They walked out under the north arch. “How soon?”

“If it goes well, as early as mid-April. Sandra has some stability for now, and I think she’ll open up and be her usual self. I’d like you to keep me advised about how she’s doing with you.”

“I will. Thanks for everything you did.”

“Thank you, Allen.”

Across the coliseum, Frank and Monique were chatting in the other archway. “Sharon, I’d like to ask you something. I guess it might be considered unprofessional.”

They stood still in the shade, and she smiled again. “Oh my. Go ahead.”

“A lot of the boys in my classes aren’t very shy about saying they’d never go to Mister Fogle to talk about anything.”

Sharon frowned. “I can’t comment on that.”

“I know, but a couple of them talk to me a little, and I usually don’t know what to say. Do you ever work with boys?”

“Unofficially.” Her face brightened. “If there’s a sister at the school, I can sometimes stick my nose in, but I believe you might be thinking about Ronnie Crawford.”

“Did Frank mention something?”

“Yes. Is Ronnie already back?”

“No, another week.”

“He only has a brother here. Frank is your best bet—he’s getting some

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resources from me to work with the Crawfords. Did you have any other boys in mind?”

“Yes, Marlon Brown. The good news is he’s a kid who had the proverbial light come on with his reading and writing.”

She smiled, looking across the coliseum. “Monique told me about your program.”

“Yeah, *our* program. Anyway, Marlon’s doing great in class, but he’s all mixed up because of this gold and black thing—he has some rough friends.”

“Well, it so happens that Diane Brown is a ninth-grader. I haven’t needed to talk to her for a long time, but I’ve been meaning to follow up with Diane and her mom.”

“Have you?” Allen grinned. “Thanks, Sharon.”

“We’ll see what we can do.” They started out into the quiet coliseum. “Monique’s waiting to go out for a little nip. Care to join us?”

“Thanks, but I have to finish settling into my new place.”

They walked past his duty area. Frank stood under the arch like a soldier at ease, hands behind his back. Monique was sitting nearby on a concrete bench, the big purse by her legs.

Sharon walked up to them first. “So, Frank, what did you think of all that?” She nodded back to the cafeteria.

“Nash and Ishimoto are pissed, so something went right.” Frank relaxed his arms, leaning on a pillar. “But Moto and Fogle will just go through the motions to satisfy Schultz—those teachers won’t get anything out of it.”

Monique stood up with her purse. “You never know who’s paying attention, *chéri*.”

He grimaced slightly. “Yeah, I’ll try to hold that thought.”

Sharon flicked back her very short bangs, then smiled at Frank. “Well, enough for one day, care to join us for a cocktail?”

“Pat’s expecting me—some other time.”

They walked inside and split up, the women entering the office and the men staying in the corridor. Standing near the door with his binder, Frank turned to Allen. “I need to go easier on Godina—he surprised me today.”

“He surprised Nash too. Do you know where Nash’s idyllic neighborhood is?”

“Somewhere near Palos Verdes.”

“Man, how does he afford that?”

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Frank waited, returning a nod to a young male math teacher who was hurrying by to leave the building. “Inherited it, he’s a widower. Nash actually grew up in Compton—still fighting all the darkies who moved in.”

“He acts like they already announced Ishimoto has the job. I should’ve asked Mrs. Berg. Have you heard anything about it?”

“I don’t know what the delay is, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Maybe it means Godina has a chance.” He raised his brows.

“Shit, Allen.” After saying his given name for the first time, Frank started down the hall.

Monique was at a doctor's appointment Friday morning, so Allen waited in the lot for Frank, who usually arrived a few minutes after she did. The inscrutable shiny black Olds was again parked over on the next block of Harding Place, three or four shadowy figures moving around inside. Godina arrived just before seven, then Frank pulled in a couple of minutes later in his blue '62 Ford.

It was an even warmer day, so Allen left his Pirate jacket on the seat, got his teaching box and walked over to Frank's car. He saw bright baby toys and stuffed animals strewn across the Ford's back seat. Instead of his denim, Frank got out wearing an off-white dashiki, zigged and zagged in horizontal earth tones—rich brown, forest green, and burnt orange.

Allen rested the heavy box on his hip. "Morning, Frank, can I get in there with you?"

He nodded, glum as usual, shouldering a loaded rucksack, WILLIAMSON stenciled in black on its drab green material.

"I saw the baby toys in your car. I didn't know you had a kid—boy or girl?" Frank's face tempered into a slight smile. "Both—twins."

"No kidding? How old are they?"

The question made him smile a bit. "Eleven months, starting to walk."

They had to wait for a couple of cars, so Allen put down his box, removed the lid, and took out Ronnie's envelope. "This is probably the last one—he's back on Wednesday. Thanks again for your help."

"Sure." Frank took the envelope. "Rob thinks this is a big subterfuge—he likes helping his brother with something."

Allen picked up his box, and they entered the crosswalk. "That's good. Ronnie's doing great, though his topics are kind of surprising."

"How's that?"

"He's never very serious, writes mostly about nature. I thought he might want to get some things off his chest."

Frank stopped at the front steps to let his pack down to insert the envelope. "Sounds serious to me. Most kids take nature for granted, like we do."

"Yeah, good point."

"After he comes back, maybe he'll join Rob in the march."

"What march is that?" They started up the steps.

"You probably heard about the East LA kids protesting their crappy schools. Well, some of ours are planning a demonstration after Doctor King visits here in a couple of weeks. They'll march at noon around the block, technically off campus. Want to join us?"

"You'll be with them?"

At the door, Frank reached into his pocket. "Schultz is unofficially allowing some of us to be sponsors. If it plays out non-violent and the kids stay off the grounds, they won't be hassled by the school, which is what we're telling them."

"Is Monique going?"

"In spirit." Frank held onto his keys, turning away from the door as if he wanted to talk. "It's a bit too much for her in a lunch period. Come to think of it, this deal could be a problem for a non-contracted teacher with Moto on his case."

"Yeah, maybe so." *Off the hook.* An old airline tag fluttered on the side of Frank's rucksack. "I noticed your pack, do you mind telling me if you were in the war?"

"Cartographer on an army base—my little brother was there." He stared at his keys for a moment. "Killed by our own damn napalm."

Jesus. "Sorry to hear that."

He looked up. "Don't be. Everybody from around here has somebody dead or maimed from Vietnam."

The black Olds drove off; Allen flinched at an explosion that followed it.

Blasé, Frank glanced at the car. "Just a firecracker."

"You know him? I've seen that car a lot."

"Yeah, that guy's trouble—didn't even make it into here." Frank sighed, then faced him. "Allen, my wife likes to remind me that I'm sometimes too

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negative, like last night when you and I were talking—it makes sense that you'd think they had to wise up about Moto." He paused. "I wish I was wrong, but I heard that they'll announce today that she got the job."

Allen groaned a little. "Man, it's so completely nuts."

Frank opened the door. They entered, stopping by the office. "It's the 'Peter Principle'—for principals."

"Peter Principle?"

"From an article that's going to be a book. It means promoting people to their level of incompetence."

Allen made a loud one-syllable scoff. "She's *already* incompetent." After Linda and Mrs. Eichler raised their heads in the office, he spoke more quietly. "Are you going to work for her?"

"No, against her—Jackson, Nash, Fogle and the rest aren't going anywhere. What about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"After our annual September resignations, even Moto will be out looking for you."

"I doubt it." Allen sighed. "Hell, I don't even know yet if I'm a teach—"

"Later." Frank was already walking into the main hallway.

Crap, I'm supposed to be Mister Chips? He hurried upstairs and got ready for his classes.

During duty, some students were already talking about Ishimoto. The leaked news seemed to sap the energy from a lot of kids; the day played out like a dismal Monday before Schultz made his politically expedient announcement about the new principal just before the final bell.

After most of his Creative Writing kids walked out lethargically, Allen went down for his mail with the idea of eventually leaving on time to get home and start fixing up the apartment. He found his first check in the box and was astonished to have enough money to pay all of his bills and have about a hundred and fifty dollars left over.

There was also a note from Mrs. Berg. He went in to confer with her. She said that Marlon's family, unaware of his gang involvement, would meet with her the following week. Allen returned to his room, pattered there for a while, and ended up leaving after four.

He walked past Marv's locked door and out to his latest spot near the back

of the lot. He put his apple box on the passenger seat, then held still when he saw Nash approaching a silver-grey Continental parked several spaces to the left of Marv's shack. Nash opened the door, detached himself from the briefcase, got in, then seemed to be organizing his things.

Allen inserted his ignition key but stopped when a young man in a blue poplin Dodger's jacket walked casually up the driveway. He circled the hut and leaned on its back wall, out of sight from the school but almost facing Allen, who scooted down to watch through his steering wheel. He heard Nash start the Lincoln and idle the motor. A couple of kids left the school with Cecil. The guard started his rounds, pacing steadily down the sidewalk and looking out to the parking lot twice before he walked around the building.

The Lincoln glided over to the shack. The enormous vehicle blocked Allen's view; all he could make out was the young guy resting his forearms on Nash's open window for what appeared to be a brief but agreeable conversation before he walked off. *Strange, but why should I give a crap?*

Heading for the freeway, he forgot school for a while, turning on his eight-track and keeping time to "The Lonely Bull" and "Red River Rock" by the Ventures. When he got to the apartment, he spoke to Pedro for a few minutes, then started on the dishes at the kitchen end of the studio. As he worked, his mind wandered to Nash, Van Burton and the rest of their cabal, and how they were likely gloating over their victory.

The bird chattered away, reminding Allen of his promise to Monique. Since he had money for once, maybe he could have a small housewarming. He would invite Monique, Sharon, and Frank; then Dan, Jen, and Trudy—if she could dump Rick.

He started unpacking some books and heard Pedro saying something different. The bird stopped, squawked, then said it again. "Sorry, sorry ol' bird, that's it. Sorry."

I'll be damned.



On Monday in the parking lot, Allen didn't see the familiar red Pontiac. He turned toward the squealing tires of a new candy-apple Mustang turning the corner; the red sports car entered the driveway, Monique behind the

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wheel. He walked over to the Ford, put down his box and opened the door, feeling a draft of escaping cool air.

She looked up at him, smiling, then cut the motor. "*Merci*, such service. What, you don't like my new car?"

He was gaping at the fancy gadgets on her dashboard. "No, of course I like it—just a little startled. I should've guessed you'd get something like this."

"Never too old to have a little fun." She tossed aside the cushion she was using as a booster, then lugged out her gaudy purse. They started for the street, Monique telling him a little about her new purchase.

Frank's car approached the lot as she and Allen passed Marv's hut. He put down his box. "Let's wait for him, I want to see if he's pissed at me." While Allen explained the conversation about coming back next year, Frank parked his car.

"I doubt he's angry, Allen. He'd just like to have you here on his side. Like me, he thinks you're a good teacher."

He scoffed. "Well, glad you think so."

"Your doubt is understandable, it's only been a few weeks."

"Five, to be exact." He watched Frank get out, looking for something in his rucksack. "Monique, I'm going to have a little housewarming, probably a week from this Saturday—just drinks and snacks in the evening. Is that a good time for you?"

"Well, our board meeting for the local is that night. Were you going to invite Frank?"

"I was hoping to, and Sharon."

"Good, I have an idea. Would you mind a few extra guests?"

"No, that's fine."

Frank came up to them, and they exchanged greetings and walked toward the school. Monique turned to Frank as they stepped off the curb into the crosswalk. "I think Pat needs a break from us, Frank. Allen has a new place and has graciously offered . . ." She finished explaining as they stopped at the sidewalk before the front steps.

Frank let his pack down between his plain black loafers. "You really want to host our bunch of rabble-rousers, Allen?"

He rested the box on his hip and smiled. "I think I can handle it."

Frank took out his keys and unlocked the door. "Okay, it's almost two

weeks—we'll talk later." They entered, and Frank hurried off for his room. Allen and Monique started upstairs.

She touched his arm. "See, he wasn't angry."

"I know. He's hard to figure sometimes. Is Frank your president?"

"No, Sharon. Frank is vice-president and runs most of our activities. You'll have time to investigate all of this—you don't need to join anything now."

"Sounds fair. Thanks."

They began to climb the last flight. "Allen, at your junior high, was spring fever much of an event?"

"I guess—water balloons and pranks, that sort of thing, maybe a fight or two. Why?"

"We've gone way beyond that in recent years." They stopped in the hall, outside of her room.

"You mean riots?"

"Not like big crowds destroying everything in sight, more like constant turmoil—guards and cops chasing after troublemakers. Most of it is minor, but the cherry bombs and vandalism have cost us plenty. The fights are the worst—it's awful when anyone gets hurt, but especially when it's some kid who wants no part of it." She let out a sigh. "Actually, it wasn't as bad last year as the year before, but I'm afraid this spring feels more like three years ago, before the big summer riots."

"What makes you say that?"

"The tough kids are a given, but I see a lot of anger building in others who don't usually make trouble. I'm hoping they'll vent their frustrations at the march and won't get involved in any violence. One thing we can do is stress Doctor King's message during the next weeks."

He reached into his pocket for his keys. "Do you really think the kids will listen to my two cents worth on that?"

"A lot of them will, Allen. By the way, my homeroom chatter tells me you're easing off on the discipline a bit. I don't blame you, it gets tiresome, but now is probably not a good time. It's another irony—we want things to change, but the kids also need that stability. It's up to you, of course."

"I think I'll trust your experience." He thanked her, they wished each other a good day, and Allen went into the room to finish his preparations. During duty, he watched the students closely for a while, but the crowd was Monday-sluggish again.

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He reinstated strict adherence to his rules over the next couple of days in all of his classes. Some kids looked at him as if he had suddenly gone nuts. On Wednesday in homeroom, a few boys started their journals for later in the day, and T.R. was fiddling under his desk—the others dozed or stared out at another smoggy March sky. Six boys were absent, including Rupert, who, it turned out, was able to read a little and could learn if he ever showed up to try. His absence did make it a good day for Ronnie's return. The bell rang. "See you tomorrow," he told the homeroom boys, and most of them stood up to go.

"Nah, Mister Greene—later." Darrel, who was also with Allen in third period and Creative Writing, was always amused when his teacher said *tomorrow* early in the day.

Ronnie came to period one wearing a dyed goldenrod T-shirt, his smooth head still uncovered. Without looking at Allen, he sat down to work on his journal as if he hadn't been gone for two weeks.

The tardy bell rang. Allen walked around the room and made sure everyone was writing while he checked attendance with the seating chart. Missing almost a fourth of the class, he stopped at Ronnie's desk to sign his re-admit slip. "Morning, Ronnie." The boy glanced at him ambivalently.

After fluency, Allen started them on a new reading project, then did likewise with his other four regular classes during the day. Last period in Creative Writing, they were finishing up the beginning prompt as he walked up to Ronnie's desk and initialed the last line of his absence slip. Allen whispered to him. "Ronnie, I'd like to read aloud one of the papers you wrote to convert to poetry. I won't use your name."

Ronnie just shrugged, then Allen went back up front and asked the kids to put everything down, sit back, and crank up their imaginations. Rupert sauntered unexpectedly into the room, dressed in heavy black clothing for the warm day. He glared at Ronnie, then took Michael's old seat by the window, which Rupert had "earned" by staying out of trouble the last couple of times he showed up. He gazed sullenly outside.

Allen went over to him and signed his slip. "That tardy goes in, Rupert. So you got here at noon?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"The short prompt on the board is homework for you."

“Ain’t doin’ that shit.”

“Okay, first warning.” Allen walked back to the front of the room. Only four of the seven very low readers in the small class were present; Allen would transcribe for Rupert if he decided to try, Charmane and Sandra would tutor the two girls, and Darrel had his regular level-three kid.

He explained the longer prompt on the board, asking them to think of a place, real or imagined, where they would like to travel. They were to use their five senses to describe the journey and the place itself, then tell what they would do there, and why they chose that destination. “Before you start, I’ll read two papers anonymously—not saying the authors’ names.” Allen’s definition made Charmane roll her eyes.

“These were written in another class on a similar project. I’m reading them so you can see how they responded in very different ways, yet they both did it well. Pay close attention to how they start off their papers.” Only a couple of kids groaned. Rupert, still in his reverie, hadn’t turned from the window. The class hushed as Allen looked down at the first paper, Ronnie’s. He allowed for a few errors as he read:

“I heard my niece trying to say, ‘she sells seashells by the seashore,’ and that made me think about the ocean because I never saw the real beach before, if you don’t count seeing it on TV or going to the docks. My uncle says we’ll drive down there this summer. He said it doesn’t even take an hour.”

Allen checked the kids—only Rupert didn’t appear to be listening.

“My uncle says there’s some palm trees at the beach. He says the sand is clean, no trash anywhere because people usually pick it up before they go. He says you can smell the ocean and feel the wet air when the wind blows. They have lifeguards like at the pool so nobody drowns in the waves. I might go swimming, but that’s not what I really want to do.”

He peeked again; they were still attentive. “I’ll walk real slow along the beach and look out at the water. I might see a seal or some birds that are different from here. I’ll have a coffee can and look down at the wet sand to pick up what I find that’s new to me. That’s what beachcombing is, I think. My uncle says I’ll find seaweed, seashells, rocks, even a crab I could take home in the can. Sometimes bottles and other things float up on the sand from far away. I’ll keep walking on the beach until it’s dark and I have to go home.”

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It remained quiet after he read the final words. Ronnie stared at his thumbnail. Allen waited a few more moments before he broke the silence. “At the beginning, there was an introduction between you, the reader, and what the author was planning to say—”

“Shit, it’s all a bunch a’ lies.”

The only kids who laughed at Rupert's accusation were the two other boys in black.

"Second warning, Rupert." Allen faced the class. "This is about something you *want* to do, so that part will be made up. Rupert is apparently questioning the background information." Allen turned to him. "So what is it you're questioning?"

Rupert still moped toward his window. "All of it."

"All right, please give us an example."

"Ain't gonna give you nothin'."

"How do we know what you're questioning?"

Rupert finally looked at him, his blank face morphing into a sneer. "More BS, you'll say anything to get us to talk."

"Yes, I would like you to participate. But since you don't have an example, I'll just go on—"

"It sounds like a girl, but it isn't." Rupert glowered toward Ronnie's side of the room. "He's been there—he lied."

"I doubt the author had any reason to lie about not going to the beach."

"He said he was at the docks. What's the difference?"

"It was made clear there's a big difference. Maybe there are others here who haven't been to the beach—nothing to be ashamed of."

"Bullshit, we all been to the beach."

Allen sighed after Rupert's expletive. "Okay, Rupert, you're out of here, but I'm not going to mess around with it until I have time."

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“Who gives a shit?” Rupert glared out at the coliseum.

Gathering himself, Allen turned to the class. “So, is it true, have you all been to the beach?”

“Not me, just to the docks.” Sandra smirked toward Rupert, and two other girls muttered in agreement; Charmane reached over to “skin” Sandra’s hand.

“You bitches are lyin’ too.” Rupert got to his feet and faced the class.

Allen had already reached up and hit the intercom button; now he pointed at Rupert. “You can keep right on going down to the office. I’ll be having a talk with your parents.”

Rupert laughed straight-faced. “She won’t talk to you.” He walked slowly toward the front of the room.

“Yes, office.” It was Venable.

“Rupert Washington is on his way down there for disrupting the class. I’ll be there right after school.”

“He won’t make it—I’ll call security.”

“Wait, let me talk to him.” Rupert approached Allen. They were about eye-to-eye, a few feet apart—the white downturned scar on the boy’s jaw twitched nervously. “Okay, Rupert, you want to deal with the guard or meet me in the office? Maybe we can work something out.”

“Fuck you, Greene.” He sounded more annoyed than angry. Rupert turned and walked toward Sandra and Charmane, slipping a switchblade out of his dark pants. Allen hit the call button again, then started for the two girls, stopping when he saw the knife snap open in front of Sandra’s face.

“No more lies, fat bitch.” Rupert growled at her. “Tell ’em you been to the beach.”

Sandra looked at him dismissively as if he were a nagging housefly. “Don’t matter to nobody but you, fool.” She peeked at the knife. “You don’t scare me.”

Allen had moved within five or six feet of them. “Put it down, Rupert—you’ll be in a lot less trouble.” Although he was trying to sound stern, his voice faltered.

Rupert pointed the blade at Charmane. “Fuckin’ little ugly white gimp, *you* tell ’em.” Charmane glowered back, her slender jaw stiff. Rupert’s eyes narrowed as Allen took a step closer. “Back off, Greene, or I cut her.”

Allen didn’t move; Rupert turned to Sandra again, his jaw set so hard that his head seemed to vibrate. In one quick motion, he slit the ribbon in Sandra’s

hair; she held defiantly still as the red material fell to her blouse—either sweat or a tear rolled over one cheek. Rupert jeered at Charmane and raised the knife close to the elastic that held her ponytail.

“Leave ‘em alone.” Ronnie spoke evenly, standing up four seats behind Charmane.

Rupert turned to him, making a simultaneous scoff-chuckle. “Little baldy in his piss-yellow shirt.” Focusing on Ronnie somehow made Rupert’s face and shoulders relax a little. “I know *you* ain’t her baby’s daddy.” He pointed the blade at Sandra. “Gotta have a dick for that.”

This brought snickers from the same two boys, and *Ooos* from a couple of girls; Sandra and Charmane glared at him. “It was baldy who wrote all the ocean bullshit.” Rupert grinned to the class. “Y’all know his uncle’s crazy.”

Ronnie looked right at him, unflinching. “You really that stupid, talkin’ about my uncle like that?”

“He’s jus’ like you, crazy and yellow.” Rupert jabbed the knife downward toward his much shorter adversary.

Ronnie reached into a pocket and pulled out a short metal tube with a taped wooden handle; he pointed the makeshift weapon at Rupert’s chest. “Get your dumb ass outta here.”

Allen took another step. “No, Ronnie, put it down.”

“Stay outta this, Mister Greene.”

Rupert laughed; the same boys joined in. “That piece a’junk won’t shoot—probably ain’t loaded, an’ you’re too chicken-shit to use it.”

“That right?” His eyes and hand steady, Ronnie stepped forward to direct the zip gun at Rupert’s forehead.

“Mister Greene.” It was Venable again.

“Send security now!”

As if trying to see the bullet, Rupert had been squinting at the end of the barrel. He looked one more time before he spoke. “Shit.” Rupert began to back off, gesturing at the other two boys in black to come along, but they stayed put.

Allen turned to Ronnie. “It’s okay, he’s going.”

Ronnie still directed the gun at Rupert, who came to the door pointing at his two cohorts, still in their seats. “You two punks are done with us.” He faced Ronnie. “An’ you’re dead, bald little prick.” Rupert opened the door and ran off.

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Ronnie put the weapon in his pocket, hurried to the door and peeked out. “No bullet, stupid nigger,” he mumbled.

Allen walked quickly toward him. “Ronnie, I’ve got to report this. Let me have that damn thing and—”

“That’s your freebie on the cussing, Mister Greene.” He backed out; Allen followed and called after him, but Ronnie kept running for the north stairs. The end-of-day bell rang; Allen turned back and went in to dismiss the class. Most began to leave right away, but Sandra, Charmane, and a few others got up hesitantly, their faces grim.

Allen walked toward Sandra. “That knife didn’t hurt you, right?”

“No, Mister Greene.”

“Then I guess we’re all okay.” He forced a smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Charmane and Sandra left behind the others, looking back at Allen. After locking the room, he walked quickly for the stairs, and then met Cecil at the second-floor landing.

“Hey, sorry, Mister Greene. Had ’nother problem—jus’ got word about you.”

“It’s okay, Cecil. Are there any administrators here?”

“Saw both vice-principals a minute ago.”

“Maybe you can come along with me so I don’t have to tell all this twice.”

After making the report to Godina and Cecil, Allen walked down to Frank’s room to tell him about the incident and ask if he’d go with him the next day to see Schultz about Ronnie.



Schultz was still gone Thursday morning, but Godina said that both Rupert and Ronnie had been expelled. Just after seven a.m. on Friday, Allen and Frank found the principal in his office. After Frank divulged Ronnie’s illness, Schultz said it was possible that the extenuating circumstance might help the boy get into another school in the fall. Following the meeting, the two teachers walked down the quiet hallway.

“Frank, do you think there’s really a chance Ronnie will get in somewhere else?”

“Not if Moto can help it. He’d have to show that he really wanted it, and his mom would need to go to the district and fight for him. She doesn’t have much spunk, but who knows?”

Allen took a deep breath. "Damn it."

"I'll be talking to the family some more—I'm hoping his uncle can help." They stopped at Frank's door near the south stairwell and exchanged nods with a custodian pushing a wide broom down the hall, lifting a low cloud of chalk dust into the air. "We'll do what we can about Ronnie, but we've also got to move on. It's about to get real busy around here."

"How's it going for the march?"

"They're getting ready, making signs and all."

"I haven't heard much talk in my classes about it."

"The kids in charge are eighth and ninth-graders—they'll be talking more to the younger ones soon."

"Are they sold on the non-violence?"

"Yeah." He made a somber chuckle. "They're worried about the *immaturity* of the seventh-graders."

"Who are you most worried about?"

"Expelled kids, outsiders from gangs."

"You told me Ronnie's brother is in one of the big new gangs. What did you mean by *new*?"

"It's all changed since I was a kid. They called them *clubs* in the '40s and '50s, started up to defend against white gangs like *The Spook Hunters* and *Coon Dogs*."

"Those are real names? My God, I had no idea."

"Those peckerwoods came around for years. After the big riots, they turned sneaky, looking for blacks and Mexicans in parking lots at stadiums and department stores."

"Good God."

"The new gangs mostly go after each other—more guns and drugs all the time."

"Some of our kids are into all that?"

"The ones who wear gold are like juniors to the biggest gang. The black shirts are still trying to affiliate—maybe they have by now, I don't know. The kids running the march aren't excluding them, just telling them no gang stuff. As long as we keep everyone together, I think we'll be okay."

"I'll start talking to my classes."

"Yeah, do that. If you bring up Doctor King, you'll have some kids who know the message—they'll help out."

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“Good. Frank, can we keep the poetry going for Ronnie?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Thanks.”

After the Pledge that morning, Latham came on the PA for an announcement. “. . . and here’s something we can all be very excited about. My father’s construction company is soon going to rebuild our snack booth! Our clubs will again be able to sell popcorn and”

Ignoring her, some of the boys were already up and moving around. When the announcements were over, Allen said, “Settle where you are for a minute and listen up. I told Mister Williamson I would talk to you about the student march in a couple of weeks.”

T.R. was nervously tapping the floor and winding his long hair with a forefinger. “What march?”

Marlon sneered at him from the windows. “It ain’t for little kids.” Not dressed in black himself, Marlon was standing several feet away from three other boys who were.

“All right, leave him alone, Marlon.” Allen faced the whole group. “The march is for any student who wants to support Doctor King and civil rights.”

Darrel wrinkled his brow. “Wouldn’t we get in a lot of trouble?”

“Good question. If you go, Darrel, you won’t be in trouble with the school as long as you don’t miss class and” He explained the behavior Frank was expecting, then asked what they knew about Doctor King’s philosophy.

Marlon got up. “He says violence is wrong—he says if you’re violent, you’ll get hurt back worse, and then they put you in jail.”

A tall boy in gold scoffed from a far window. “They *did* put him in jail.”

Marlon didn’t look at him. “Not for a real crime. When Doctor King goes to jail, it’s part of his protest.”

The bell sounded, and T.R. was immediately on his feet. “I ain’t gonna miss lunch for no protest.” Allen dismissed them. When he heard some boys agreeing with T.R., Allen decided it would be best to hold off talking to more kids until the march was more imminent.

That weekend, he straightened up his place, worked on some student papers, and took Trudy out Sunday afternoon for a belated birthday dinner at their parents’ favorite chicken place out on San Fernando Road. Now in her eighth month, Trudy’s girth touched the red gingham tablecloth as they sat down.

“This is fun, Allen—haven’t been here for years.”

“Yeah, still no menus.” The choices at the “ol’-timey” knotty-pine restaurant were displayed on a sign behind the register: SMALL, MEDIUM OR LARGE FRIED CHICKEN DINNER & BISCUITS, CORN ON THE COB AND FIXINS—NO SUBSTITUTIONS.

A gruff but efficient waitress took their order, then Allen smiled at his sister. “You look good, Trude—huge but good.”

“Thanks. Guess I can’t call you *Bear* anymore—you look like you’ve lost a little weight.”

“Maybe—probably because I’m on the go all day.”

She smiled. “I’m proud of you, Allen. You’re going to stick it out to the end of the year, aren’t you?”

“I think so.”

“Still fighting with those same people?”

“Yeah, but I want you to meet a few friends I’ve made.” He told her about the housewarming and meeting.

“Sounds like fun. I assume you don’t want Rick there.”

“Would you?”

“Don’t start on him. I’m just concentrating on making it through this.” She patted her belly.

“Fine, as long as he’s leaving you alone.”

“He is, literally. When he isn’t at work or the beach, he eats out a lot, then drinks in front of the TV and goes to sleep.”

“You promise to call me if there’s trouble?”

“Yes, Allen.”

They agreed not to talk more about Rick, then had a pleasant meal, Trudy asking to hear more about the counselors and social services at his school.



After a relatively calm Monday, Allen wanted to go earlier than usual on Tuesday to catch up on his reading transcriptions, so he arranged to meet Godina at six-thirty. There were only two cars in the lot when he arrived. He drove to the rear, but the school seemed ridiculously distant, so he backtracked and parked in a space near the street.

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Before he walked past Marv's hut, the black Olds inched by, the frame lowered halfway to the ground, its chrome hubcaps gleaming in the sun. Watching the silhouettes of three others besides the driver and his huge Afro, Allen walked to the curb, then hurried into the crosswalk as the Olds stopped at the far end of Main.

As he stepped up on the opposite curb, the car's back door swung open, three boys tumbling out. Although they were nearly half a football field away, he recognized the two taller ones—Rupert and his mentor, Michael Bradley, expelled on the first day of school.

Allen put his box down and walked very slowly toward them. Maybe they'd see him and jump back into the car, but they ran from the curb up to the arborvitae by the school, Michael lugging a galvanized bucket. From his window, the driver called, "Go on," pointing at the building. The boys just glanced at Allen as they reached into the pail and started chucking egg-sized stones up at the uncovered third-story windows.

He started to jog. Halfway there, a window above shattered, followed by their loud cheers. They kept throwing, but Rupert and the smaller boy couldn't break one. Michael nailed another pane, glass cascading down into the old cypress. The driver, now about twenty yards away, extended his torso from the window. He pointed a handgun at Allen, who stopped and moved back one slow step at a time, his pulse thumping in his neck.

Michael turned, grinning. "Fuck you, Greene!" He pitched a rock right at Allen, who jerked to the side and heard the projectile draft by, two or three feet from his shoulder. Michael laughed, then launched another stone through a window. The driver retracted into the car, calling the boys. They ran back nonchalantly, still chuckling.

Michael stopped, turned and fired off another rock at Allen. He ducked, but the stone parted his hair, glancing off his skull. He straightened up slowly and heard Michael and Rupert laughing as they got into the Olds with the other boy. The driver peeled out, screeching the tires, and the car vanished around the corner.

A block away in the other direction, an LAPD black-and-white raced toward the school. Allen made himself take a deep breath as the cop came closer; he pointed toward the getaway, trying to signal that the car went left. The squad car sped to the corner and turned right.

He moved slowly toward his box, looking down. Allen spotted and picked up one of Michael's rocks—grey, speckled and smooth, like a riverbed stone. Checking his head, there wasn't any blood, just a small knot. A cop car took the corner and pulled up to him. The officer in the passenger seat asked for his name.

"Allen Greene. I teach here." He quickly explained what happened, then the policeman asked if he recognized any of the boys. Allen hesitated, then told him the two names. After watching the cops drive away, he lifted the box and forced the stone through one of the air holes. His pulse finally began to slow, and he made another long exhale.

Still jittery, he walked across the yellow half-dead grass. Allen put the box down and had to turn sideways to get past the pokey cypress branches and dusty spider webs to look into Godina's empty office. "Shit." He made his way back to the lawn. Godina, in a dark suit, waved from the front steps. Allen got his box and hurried over.

"A custodian said a teacher was walking toward those boys—was that you?" Godina briefly touched Allen's shoulder.

"Yeah, until I saw a damn gun."

"Smart move. Did you know any of them?"

Allen told him the two names and explained what happened as they walked in. There wasn't a soul inside, not even a guard.

"I'll add assault to the charges, Mister Greene. The police will probably have more questions for you."

"That's fine." Allen hadn't checked his mail after school on Monday, so he followed Godina into the office. He found a sealed Thurgood Marshall envelope in his mailbox, MISTER GREENE typed on the front. He walked into the vacant faculty lounge, reading the letter:

Dear Mister Greene,

Speaking for the administration of Thurgood Marshall Junior High, we would like to thank you for filling in as a Language Arts staff member when we were short of credentialed teachers. We have appreciated your commitment to regular attendance.

T. Lloyd Winetsky

At this time, we are expecting to hire certificated teachers for fall semester and will not be offering emergency contracts. We wish you the best of luck in your career endeavors.

Sincerely,

Beatrice Ishimoto *BI*

Vice-Principal/Principal-elect

Although the letter wasn't unexpected, he tore it up and tossed the shreds into the trash. Allen smiled about the union meeting that would be at his place on Saturday, then laughed aloud at Nash and Ishimoto as if they were sitting there in the lounge. *Okay, Beatrice, my turn to raise a little hell.*

After his first-period class finished fluency writing, Allen brought up the subject of the protest march. Sandra raised her hand right away. “Mister Williamson fixed it so we could do this and not get in trouble. I hear some a y’all.” She paused, snarling at two boys. “Sayin’ it don’t matter. Well, people *died* other places for *our* rights, even some kids, an’ Doctor King was in jail for us too. Allayall got no reason not to march.”

Many of the girls called out in support; a few boys nodded while others grumbled. Allen allowed more debate until it turned silly, then he had them work for the rest of the period. As Frank predicted, there were at least a couple of kids in each class ready to talk about Doctor King and the students’ protest, though none so rousingly as Sandra. By the time she spoke up again last period, Allen was less informational and openly encouraging the kids to participate.

The talk of non-violence didn’t ease the growing spring fever during that week. Firecrackers and vandalism were on the rise, as well as fights—usually two boys in front of a large rowdy crowd. Allen set aside a few minutes of each class with an open question like, “What are you hearing about the march next week?” A handful of students in each period talked about it for as long as he would let them, and more of the others seemed to be paying attention.

On Friday after school, he went to a market in Hollywood to shop for his guests on Saturday evening. When he got home to his small kitchen area, Allen discovered that he bought more provisions than he probably needed. He put things away, then double-checked to make sure that everything in the apartment was clean.

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Although he wasn't much of a fan of basketball or UCLA, the Bruins and the amazing Lew Alcindor were back in the finals. He fooled with the rabbit ears on his small black-and-white TV, then settled on the sofa with some late dinner and a beer.

He woke up Saturday morning before ten o'clock to cartoons, half a bottle of warm beer, and some congealed spaghetti. Allen changed Pedro's cage, spruced up the kitchen, and then went shopping for a couple more things.

At about five, in clean jeans and his Pirate T-shirt, he was putting out some food when someone knocked. Both Dan and Monique were coming early to help out; he guessed that it was Dan. "Come in if you're able!"

His very tall but slightly built friend entered in jeans, a brown polo, and his red California Angel's cap. He dipped its brim, although Dan usually cleared doorways by an inch or two. "If I'm *able*—what's that supposed to mean?"

"Damned if I know—my dad used to say it."

Dropping two large bags of chips on the dinette table, Dan's thin but handsome face was mottled with even more freckles than usual.

Allen took carrots and celery out of the fridge. "Thanks for the chips. Where's your better half, O'Mara?"

"You got that right, wise guy. The baby has a low fever—didn't want to leave her with a sitter." He tossed his cap on a chair. A rim of thin orange hair encircled his pink and balding pate.

"Sorry to hear that. Ready for a cold brew?"

"Thought you'd never ask." Dan went over to Allen, who had piled the vegetables on an extra counter that stuck out a few feet like a wet bar, giving the kitchen a sense of separation from the rest of the large room. "What can I do?"

"Maybe push the sofa-bed to the wall and check the stereo—it's been cutting out."

Dan left the kitchen area. "Hey, your little pad's looking pretty good now."

"Yeah, it's fine."

Pedro was muttering in his sleep as Dan walked by to the brick and plank shelves that took up much of the wall space. He started to fool with the small stereo.

Allen opened two bottles of beer. "See anything wrong?"

"Yeah, your needle's shot, but the doohickey on the arm had an extra one—it's already in." He put on Bob Dylan, singing the guttural refrain in "Just Like a Woman."

“Hey, after that, put on the album with ‘It Ain’t Me, Babe.’” He sliced some summer sausage.

“That figures.” Dan checked out some record jackets near the rows of books. He walked to Allen’s poster of a steely-eyed intrepid owl diving for a kill, a full moon in the background. A Buddhist master’s poem said, “Our Moments Here Are Finite, Honor Each of Them,” printed in the moonlight.

“Some heavy shit there,” Dan said, pushing the couch to the wall. “Man, this is all right—outta the cave and ready to line up the ladies for your fold-out.”

“Right, they’ll have to take numbers.” He started to wash the vegetables.

Dan sat with his bottle in one of the chintzy plastic-covered chairs at the round table. Taking a slug of beer, he talked about UCLA winning the semi-finals and eyed the bowls and platters of peanuts, crackers, cheese, pretzels, sausage, and store-bought brownies. He turned to Allen, who was peeling carrots. “Who’s going to eat the rabbit food—you, Chubs?”

The phone rang on the shelf near the stereo. Allen hurried over to turn down the music, then answered. Trudy told him that she would be late but was still going to drop by. Rick heckled her in the background, but Allen couldn’t make out the words. “No pressure, Trude—just come if it works out.”

She spoke furtively. “I’ll be by. I think he’s going to leave.”

Allen hung up, then Dan walked over with his beer, munching some peanuts. “What’s wrong?”

“Rick the Prick.”

“I thought he wasn’t coming.”

“He isn’t.”

“Then take it easy—you’re ready for this.” They sat on the sofa. “You hear that Kennedy announced today? Waited until McCarthy gave LBJ a good run—what an opportunist.”

“Aren’t they all?”

Dan took a drink. “That’s pretty cynical. I’m stayin’ *clean with Gene*—you?”

“A lot of my kids like Bobby almost as much as Doctor King.”

“That’s a reason to support him?”

“He represents some hope—hard not to be for him.”

“Man, a month and a half and listen to you. Does this mean you want to keep teaching?”

“All I know is I don’t have a job in September. I’m just doing the best I can for now—don’t know about after that.”

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"I get it, Gunga Din. Gotta hand it to you—our kids are jumpy too, but I sure as hell haven't had any weapons in my room."

"Just those two times."

"Same kid involved, right?"

"Yeah, but he wasn't the aggressor either time."

"You hear about the high-school march near us the other day? It got so out of hand they had to call the cops."

"I heard it was the cops who got out of hand."

"That's the rumor—I don't know."

"Our kids are having a march next week."

"You're not going with them are you?"

"I wasn't, but I changed my mind."

"Jesus, Allen, you're the same as a sub—they'll can your ass, like that." He snapped his fingers.

"I get along with the guy who's still in charge."

"If you say so." Dan shook his head and took a swig. "So all these people here from the local—that means you joined?"

"Not yet, what about you?"

"No, just the Alliance."

"From what I've seen, the majority of the Alliance teachers at Marshall either don't like teaching or don't like our kids."

"Aren't you exaggerating a little?"

"Maybe, but not much."

"The teachers here tonight won't mind us hanging around their meeting?"

"Not at all. We're playing poker with a couple of spouses." There was another knock at the door. "There's Monique. I have a feeling you two will hit it off." He hurried over to open up.

"*Bonsoir, amour!*" With her winsome smile and looking relaxed in a red summer dress that came down just above her knees, she seemed twenty years younger.

"Hi, Monique, glad you're here." He squeezed her hand with both of his. She had the big purse, but not overloaded, on her other shoulder. "Come in, come in—this is my friend, Dan."

Dan walked over and reached down for her hand after she put the purse on a dinette chair. "Nice to meet you, Monique." Like most men, his eyes paused a fleeting moment on her chest.

She was looking up at him, wide-eyed. “Well, *merci*, Dan—a pleasure to meet you. Pardon me, but for someone my size, your height is impressive, and a redhead to boot.”

“It’s okay.” He made a broad smile. “Just so you don’t have to ask—yes, I did play third-string basketball, and the weather’s about the same up here.”

Monique laughed. “Good attitude.” She took out two slim bottles of red wine from her purse and handed them to Allen. “Northern California, not Southern France.”

“Would you like the wine? I’m making frozen margaritas.”

“That sounds wonderful—no salt, please. How can I help?”

“Maybe chop some vegetable sticks?”

“My specialty.”

Her liveliness seemed to bring Pedro out of his stupor. The bird clicked and bowed, then he came out with, “I’m a stinker, I’m a stinker . . .”

Monique hurried over to the cage. “My God, just like that?” Pedro clammed up immediately but jumped onto the bars near her face. Startled, she pulled back a few inches. “Oh, I made him stop. Did I scare him?”

“No, he wants you to teach him.” Allen told her the *puddy tat* line. “Just say it to him over and over.” He poured mixer with tequila and asked Dan to get the ice from the refrigerator.

After Monique spoke to the bird several times, she backed away a little, still watching him, mesmerized. Pedro bowed twice and said, “Sorry, ol’ bird, that’s it. Sorry.”

“Should I be insulted?” Monique asked with a laugh.

Allen tasted the concoction with a spoon. “He’s just showing off—picked that one up on his own.”

“Amazing. Oh, he’s eating now.” She stepped toward the jacaranda outside, inhaling its fragrance. “How old is Pedro?”

He added ice to the blender. “About fifty, in human years.”

“Ah, almost a fellow senior citizen.” As she checked out the books, Allen raised his voice to tell her more about the bird. Monique stopped at the owl poster, staring at it and turning her head sideways as if she were in an art museum. “This is beautiful, Allen.”

Dan stopped cracking ice. “Whoa, Gunga Din doesn’t need any encouragement.”

She smiled and walked back to the kitchen as the blender’s racket began.

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Monique took a knife and deftly chopped the carrots and celery while Allen finished mixing. He poured the drinks into small glasses that once contained cheese.

Monique put the vegetables in the refrigerator and picked up her glass. "They won't be here for a while. Shall we sit?"

Dan grabbed a chair and the sausage plate. "Yeah, since the bird stopped squawking."

Cocktails in hand, Allen and Monique walked to the sofa and sat down. She took a long swig of her drink. "I like your apartment, Allen—lively and cozy at the same time. This margarita's delicious." Allen turned Dylan way down so that it would be easier to talk, and Dan got up to get sausage from the plate on the bookshelf. He and Monique finished chatting about Jen and the baby as Dan sat on his chair again.

Allen took a sip of his margarita. "You two are just the ones to answer a rookie question." He turned to her. "I told Dan that the majority of our staff don't like teaching at Marshall."

"*Majority* is probably generous. What's your question?"

"Okay, so what goes on in teachers' college?"

She sighed. "Well, unless there have been some recent changes, I'd say that most teacher-training is simplistic and irrelevant."

Dan nodded. "Still the same—just jumping through hoops."

Monique turned to Allen. "All right, no more shop talk for now. Is your sister coming? I'd like to meet her."

"Maybe. Rick's being an ass again."

"Well, you still have enough for poker. Pat is home with the twins, but you'll have Connie and Linda, at the least."

"Linda Watson?" Allen looked down to inspect his clothes.

She laughed at him a little. "Yes, Mitch is on the board, and Linda usually tags along with him to our functions."

"Oh."

"Such a frown, Allen. They're childhood chums—they went to the same schools and still go to the same church."

Dan raised a brow. "Linda, huh? You've been holding out on me."

"One of our secretaries—nothing going on, O'Mara."

"Sounds like you haven't tried."

“He’s right, *chéri*. If you ask her out, all you’d be doing is showing interest. Even if she declines, I’m sure she’ll appreciate the gesture. She’s a sweet girl.”

“Yeah, out of my league.”

Monique finished a long drink. “Why do you think so?”

“Because I’m *this*.” He moved a hand dismissively from his face down to his spare tire. “And she’s, um, beautiful.”

Monique shook her head. “Oh, dear, I can’t let that one go. First, you’re a good-looking young man, and if you think Linda’s that superficial, why would you be interested in her?”

He sighed, downing more of his drink. “I see what she does—I don’t think she’s superficial.”

Monique raised a brow. “Perhaps you do, but in a different way. Do you think part of the reason she might not go out with you is because you’re white?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Dan had been reaching for more sausage, but he sat down without it. “Hold on—she’s black?”

“Yes, O’Mara.”

“Man, it’s good you didn’t find the nerve—you can’t start up something like that when you hardly get along with, uh—”

“White people?”

Dan’s freckled face contorted. “Sorry.”

“Forget it, you’re right.” Allen raised his glass to Monique. “But my new redheaded friend here is proof I’m getting along better.”

Monique smiled back. “Yes, that’s true.” Her face turned more serious. “But I don’t agree with you two.”

During their ensuing discussion, Dan maintained that most whites and blacks weren’t ready for such drastic social change as interracial dating. Allen stayed out of it, retrieving the rest of the batch of margaritas.

After they started a second round of drinks, Monique was speaking even more adamantly. “. . . and an interracial relationship is similar in some ways to the one I have now. Who’s going to tell *me* I can’t date whomever—”

She stopped because Pedro had started to jabber, shuddering his bright feathers before blurting out, “Geev Pedro beeg kees, beeg kees . . .”

“Oh, my God.” Monique stood and walked toward the bird, downing the last of her drink.

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Allen got up with his empty glass. “When you neglect him, he says that to get you over there.”

Dan scoffed. “You think you could prove that?”

“Of course he can.” Monique grinned. “Pedro has it all figured out. I’ll just give the little doll a *kees* and some more *puddy tat* instruction.” She held up her glass. “I’m dry here, *amour*, can you whip us up another recipe?”

Allen and Dan looked at each other and laughed. “Comin’ right up. A little help, O’Mara?” As they went to the kitchen, someone knocked at the door. Allen answered it.

Frank was there with a large bucket of chicken and two full paper sacks, a small crowd behind him. “Hey, Allen—rounded ’em up below. Two aren’t showing, but we have a quorum.”

“Welcome, welcome.” They started coming in, some with folding chairs, others with food, plastic plates, utensils and cups—plus beer, pop, whiskey and vodka. Mitch put his bags on the counter, but he didn’t stay close to Linda.

In dark slacks and an opened-collared white dress shirt, Mitch Warner was about five-ten, thin, and nearly as fair as Linda. He had his black hair slicked back. A couple of years older than Allen, he was a genial, reserved man—a music teacher who worked non-stop with the students, but he was hassled a lot by some tough kids. Frank was still trying to change Mitch’s mind about leaving Marshall to sell insurance.

After giving Sharon a hug, Monique introduced her tall friend to Dan, then shouted, “Look everyone, Mutt here!” She pointed to herself, then to Sharon and Dan. “With Jeff and Jeff!” Sharon, in a bright cowboy shirt tucked into long tapered blue jeans, smacked Monique playfully on the arm.

Monique introduced Ron Lee to Dan, then Connie Lee to both Dan and Allen. In a tropical shirt and new jeans, Connie was in her fifties and Asian like Ron, who Allen knew was of Korean descent. Wearing an outfit similar to his wife’s, Ron’s grey-streaked black hair almost touched his shoulders; hers was short and dark. Both of the Lees were about five-six, a bit chubby with pleasant round faces, though Ron’s had more stress lines.

Connie smiled at Allen. “You’d better be a good poker player, or I’m going to take all your loot.”

“Guess I better hope it’s penny-ante.”

Not introducing Mitch or Linda, Monique looked to Allen. Mitch was

closer, so Allen shook his hand and introduced him to Dan. Mitch took it upon himself to present Linda; Allen tried not to look annoyed. She was in brown slacks, a white blouse and thin cardigan, her smile radiant as always.

Allen nodded to her. "Evening, good to see you."

Linda lifted her slender arm toward him. "Thanks for being the host."

He held her incredibly soft hand a bit too long, then pointed out the bathroom to his guests. They poured drinks, filled their plates, and sat down to eat from their laps. Frank took a few 45 RPM records from his sack and put them on the stereo. The first song, "Dance to the Music," was by a group Allen recently heard about, Sly and the Family Stone. Tapping one foot to the lively beat, he made another batch of margaritas and a plate of food for himself.

Allen grabbed a folding chair and sat by Dan, who was on the sofa, Monique and Sharon next to him. "Good people, Allen," Dan said, then he spoke under his breath. "Man, no wonder you're so gone on Linda. Except for the Afro, you can hardly tell she's black."

"Jesus, Dan."

"What? You were right—she's way out of your league."

Monique leaned in. "Don't listen to him."

Holding a chicken leg, Allen whispered back to her. "You sure there's nothing serious between Linda and Mitch?"

"No, I'm not sure."

Dan laughed. "Gonna have to be brave and find out yourself, Chubs."

"Clam it, O'Mara."

Connie danced with Ron, and Monique with Frank while the others finished eating, then Sharon had the board members pull up chairs around the sofa to start their meeting. Allen and Dan cleared everything from the dinette table, then they sat there with Connie. She took cards and poker chips out of a bag. "Okay, it's penny, nickel, dime—nickel ante, three raises. Three bucks minimum to start—I have change." Linda came back from the bathroom and sat in the chair opposite Dan. She held a five-dollar bill and a cheese glass with *crème de menthe* over ice.

As they played mostly seven-card stud, Allen furtively watched Linda and lost nearly every hand, then he heard Sharon say something in the meeting about the upcoming march. ". . . the kids will get a good boost from Doctor King being in L.A. tomorrow." Frank started talking about a teachers' wildcat

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strike later in the spring. “. . . we can't let our walkout get smeared by the press like the one in East L.A. did.”

Sharon nodded. “They only interviewed Alliance teachers, for God's sake.”

“Right. For our deal, everybody has to have a copy of the grievances, or know them. Tell people to remember *ODORS*.” Nobody laughed at Frank's acronym; he ticked off the list on his fingers: “O—Overcrowded classes, D—Decrepit facilities, O—Out-of-date materials and equipment, R—Racist curriculum, and S—Staff development relevant to our school.”

Pedro piped up with, “Howdy, Mister Dillon. Howdy”

When they stopped laughing, Allen called over. “You want me to move him?”

“No, he's fine.” Monique was still chuckling.

By the time it sounded like the meeting was about to break up, Connie and Linda had the tallest piles of chips; Allen was getting up for another knock at the door. “They killed us, Dan.” He walked over and opened up. His sister stood there, wiping away tears and forcing a smile. “What's wrong, Trude?”

She walked just inside, looking uncomfortable and unbalanced in her pup tent-sized blue smock. She smiled to the poker players, who had all stood when she came in. Trudy turned to her brother. “Can we talk just a sec?”

“Sure.” He led her back out to the small porch.

“Allen, I had to bring Rick along—he's down in the car, sleeping it off. I'll just see your place, meet your friends, and then go.”

“Okay, if that's what you think.”

They went back in. The poker players had hauled their chairs away to socialize with the others. “My sister Trudy, everybody.” Allen said each name as she shook hands, stopping for a longer chat with Sharon and Monique, who had been talking to Pedro. Then he left his sister with Linda and Connie, telling them that Trudy, like Connie, had studied social work.

While the three women struck up a conversation, he slipped away over to Dan, who was on the sofa, where Monique and Sharon had joined him again. Allen sat in a chair, facing them. Out of Dan's sight, the two women were holding hands.

Man, are they Except for high-school jerks bragging about *rolling queers down on Ivar*, the extent of Allen's knowledge of homosexuality came from his reading. He turned awkwardly to Dan, but someone started banging on the door.

Los Angeles, 1968

Before Allen got all the way up, Rick stumbled in, wearing jeans and a yellow T-shirt, a coconut palm on front—his long bleached hair was unkempt and had a black streak, probably car grease. Everyone stopped talking to watch him stagger over to Trudy at the cage, where she had been showing Pedro to Connie and Linda.

“Fuckin’ bird.” He slurred his words in a low voice. “Less-go, Trudy.”

She glared at him. “Go back down to the car—I’ll be there in a few minutes.” Trudy faced Connie, and the guests started to talk a little. Allen walked toward the kitchen.

Rick was focusing on the booze over on the counter. “I’ll jus’ have some refreshment while ya’ finish yapping.”

Allen got between Rick and the liquor. “How about something to eat, Rick?” Everyone was silent again.

“Outta my way, fat-ass.”

“Know what? You can just get the hell outta here.”

Trudy took Rick’s arm from behind. “C’mon, we’re leaving right now.”

“Wait a minute.” Rick’s bleary eyes finished scanning the party. “What’s this shit, niggers, chinks, and ol’ dykes? This’s who yr’ asshole brother wants you to know?”

Everyone stood as Trudy tugged at his arm. “Damn it, Rick, that’s enough.”

“Fuck off!” He hooked his arm inside of Trudy’s and flung her away as if she were as light as a small child; she fell with a horrible thud, rolling on her side like an oversized ten-pin. Linda and Connie got right down on the floor with her before Allen bear-hugged his brother-in-law from behind. Rick yelped, bursting from his grasp and turning to Allen with his fist cocked, but Ron Lee was there to slug Rick with a quick left jab to the upper cheek. He crumpled to the floor, semi-conscious.

Connie told Allen that Trudy had some spotting; they left right away for the emergency room at a nearby hospital in Hollywood. In the back seat of the Mustang, he held Trudy in a blanket as Monique sped down Vermont Avenue. Frank and the Lees stayed behind with Rick to wait for the police.

After a half-hour or so at the hospital, a nurse told Allen that Trudy was going to be okay. She said the doctor would be more specific as soon as they finished moving her upstairs to a regular room. Allen told Monique the news. She hugged him briefly, then left with Sharon to “handle a few things.”

As soon as Trudy was settled on the fourth floor, Allen went in. She was half-awake but not talking. He held her hand until the doctor arrived and asked Allen to leave for a couple of minutes. When the doctor came out, he said that Trudy had not miscarried, but it was still a concern. She was in a mild state of shock; there were also some suspicious bruises unrelated to the kind of fall she had taken. Trudy wasn’t concussive, so they gave her something mild to help her sleep. The doctor wanted her to stay at least two days for rest and observation.

Allen returned to the waiting area. He told Dan, Linda and Mitch what the doctor said. “When she gets out, I guess I’ll take her back to the house and just keep Rick away from there.”

Dan got up. “She can stay with us in our extra bedroom as long as she wants—I called Jen.”

“Are you sure, Dan?”

“Jen said she’d love to have her.”

Los Angeles, 1968

“Thanks, I’ll see what she says.” Allen turned to Mitch and Linda. “Sorry you had to witness all that tonight.”

“All that matters is your sister and the baby are okay.” Linda stood up and embraced him from the side.

Detecting a scent of citrus, Allen didn’t let go until she did. “Thanks for coming over—see you guys on Monday.” Mitch nodded and shook Allen’s hand.

Dan was still standing nearby. “I’m riding back to your place with them. I got Frank’s number so I can find out about Rick. Call me later.”

They shook hands, holding their grips for an extra moment. “Thanks for everything, Dan.”

“Sure. Try to get some rest yourself.”

“There’s a big chair in there where I can crash. Call you in a while.” When he walked into Trudy’s room, she was snoring. Allen stood there a minute or two, his eyes getting heavy.

He settled in the comfortable chair for more than an hour, but thoughts of Trudy and Rick overcame his drowsiness. Allen went out and called Dan. He said that Rick was arrested and the cops had already spoken to the doctor about Trudy’s condition.

His sister was still asleep when Allen left her early Sunday morning. Monique was in the waiting area, drinking coffee. “Morning. Were you here all night?” he asked.

“Most of it. I checked on you two—you were both sawing wood.”

“I appreciate it, but you didn’t have to stay.”

She smiled a little. “You might want to go home to freshen up and get your car. When you’re ready, I’ll take you.”

“Okay, thanks. So you heard they arrested Rick?”

“Yes, I called Frank.”

He sat by her, and she reached over to take his hand. He squeezed back, then patted her and let go. “What a night, thank you so much.”

“Of course, *amour*—you had a lot of help.”

“Yeah. Tell me, where did Ron come up with that jab?”

“Lefty was a lightweight boxer in the army.”

“Man, I owe him a call. If Trudy’s still doing okay, maybe I’ll clean up my place a little before I come back.”

She *tsked*. “We handled all that, Allen. You have food for a week in your fridge.”

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“Oh—thanks.” They sat quietly for a few moments. “Monique, I’m sorry for the way Rick spoke about you and Sharon.”

“He spoke like that to everyone—no need to apologize. He’s just one pathetic person. Believe me, we can handle it. I guess you were a little shocked by us.”

“Yeah, but it’s none of my business.”

“Well, let me say this much. Sharon and I loved each other as friends for years before it became an even stronger bond. The people who were there tonight make up most of our friends we can relax around.”

“I can’t even imagine what you two run into.”

“We’re not ashamed of who we are, but life’s too short for constant hassles, so we usually pass for two sweet ol’ widows—the tall and the short of it.”

Allen smiled, then thought for a few moments. “I heard you guys discussing a teachers’ protest.”

“Yes, do you really want to talk about that now?”

“Why not? I already decided to go out with Frank and the kids. What’s the worst that Ishimoto can do, try to fire me?”

“Yes, but they need you for now, and being in the march isn’t something she can take to Greg.”

“When do the teachers walk out?”

“Two weeks after the kids’ march, probably during last period. I’ll be out there if it isn’t too hot.”

“What about the Alliance?”

“Some of their members are in both organizations—a few will join us.”

“Well, we’ll see if I’m still around.”

Allen caught the doctor on morning rounds, coming out of Trudy’s room. He said she was doing better, and they were more confident that the baby would be okay. Trudy was crying when Allen went in. He held her for a while until she slept again.

An hour or so later, she woke up, her dark eyes deep in their sockets, her hair loose and sticky. She said that she remembered most everything except the ride. A nurse came in to help her clean up, and he waited outside the door.

Her bed was raised a little when he returned. The nurse had left the TV on low to a Sunday news show. “All fresh and clean. Feel better, Trude?”

“I sure do. Did you get any sleep at all?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Are you up to hearing about Rick?”

She nodded, then he told her that Rick would be in jail until the cops spoke to her. “You’ll press charges this time, right?”

“A day or two in jail won’t change anything, but he can damn well do it anyway.” She was facing the TV, her eyes glazed over. “I’ll tell them that’ll be enough, and that’s the last he gets from me. I don’t want a nickel from him, except for one thing.” She turned to her brother. “He’s damn well going to pay for me to finish my Master’s. Would you bring my address book from home? It’s by the phone—I’m going to call my lawyer.”

“Sure, do you need anything else?”

“Not yet.” She made a deep sigh. “Allen, when they let me go, I don’t think I’ll be quite ready to stay at the house alone.”

“You don’t have to.” He told her about Jen’s offer.

“That’s so nice of them—I’ll just need a couple days.”

“If Rick is actually gone, I’ll move back in with you until after the baby comes.”

“Oh, he’s gone.” She was crying again. “Sorry, Allen. Thank you for everything.”

He wiped his own tears and hugged her, then she sniffled a while and began to stare at the TV again. He went to her sink and threw some cold water on his face. “Trudy, I’ll be back in an hour or so.” He walked out to Monique.

After Allen rode with her to his apartment, he spent most of that Sunday at the hospital trying to limit Trudy’s visitors—the gals she grew up with had gotten word of her situation. He had his schoolwork with him and tried to read some papers after Trudy went to sleep. Allen found Michael’s stone in the box and stared at it for a long time before he got back to work.

That evening, he retrieved Trudy’s address book at the house, then came back to the hospital to watch some TV with her. Allen was cheered by the news that Doctor King’s sermon and march in South-Central Los Angeles had come off without any major problems.



All day Monday in class, at least one student brought up Doctor King every hour, a couple of them trying the old *get-the-teacher-to-talk-so-we-don't-have-to-work* strategy. Whatever their motivation, Allen explained

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Doctor King's connections to Gandhi and Thoreau, then started each class on a project about civil rights.

Early Monday evening, he went by the house to pick up some clothes for Trudy, then he drove to the hospital to get her released. He settled her in with Dan and Jen before going back to the apartment, which he would keep until he was sure that Trudy followed through with the separation. Rick had been released to his brother and was to appear in court again that Thursday.

During the week at school, some serious fights broke out, causing two kids to be taken to the hospital. High-school truants and other young adults were constantly chased from the grounds; cherry bombs exploded regularly, two more trashcans were set ablaze, and a commode was blown to pieces. An LAPD squad car patrolled the school every day.

There was an after school meeting on Wednesday in Monique's room for the eighth and ninth-grade march organizers and their faculty chaperones, including Frank, Sharon, Mitch, Ron Lee, and now Allen. With all of the recent turmoil, the importance of non-violence was again stressed by everyone.

Allen arranged for his first-ever sub on Thursday afternoon so he could take Trudy to Rick's court appearance. The judge announced that the city and the defendant had reached an agreement. He summed up the crime, then statements from witnesses and the doctor. Rick sat there, looking clownish in a dark suit and his bleached hair, just staring at the table. Trudy's lawyer spoke briefly, saying that she had already taken initial steps to sue for divorce. The judge explained Rick's probation and restraining order, then glared at him, promising immediate incarceration for violation of either decree. Allen took Trudy back to Dan and Jen's—he wouldn't have time to move her back to the house until the weekend.

Friday morning in the parking lot, Allen told Monique the latest on Trudy. She gave him a hug, and they started for the street, Monique telling him that the kids seemed ready for their march after period four. "Sorry to follow all the good news with bad, but it was crazy in your room yesterday afternoon. As soon as I saw the sub they sent, there wasn't much I could do."

When he entered his classroom, three things were normal: the desks in rows, the floor swept, and the chalkboard washed. Salvageable rubbish had been left by the janitor in two large piles in the corner by his desk. Dictionaries and texts were stacked there precariously and surrounded by pencil pieces,

paper, school forms, fluency notebooks, chalk, a super ball, rubber bands, and the tiny green boxes for hole-reinforcement stickers, which had been swept up like round white confetti into a small separate pile.

His closet and desk, neither of which he ever locked, were in shambles. Walking by some pencil and ink graffiti on the yellow walls, he came to the file boxes. The morning folders had been bothered but were mostly in tact; those from period five and six were nearly all gone, notebooks strewn over the table or among the piles on the floor. Allen picked up one of the few folders that had made it back into the period-five file. It was Randall's, a kid who belonged in a higher level:

What were doing today is nothing its a day off because this ladys a big joke. She looks like Ant Bee but not so fat and she sounds like her and just as dum. Everybodys laughing at her and somebody just hit her big but with a spitwod. She's always warning us how Jesus watch's how we all behave. Like hes Santa Clause or something. She's in the school everyday but its not even funny no more.

He put Randall's folder back, then glowered at the mess. The file for Creative Writing appeared to be in good shape; Sandra, Charmane and some others must have kept things fairly calm in seventh period.

During morning classes, he said little to the kids about the state of the room, since they weren't involved. Knowing exactly what had happened, most of them said nothing; a few smart-alecks laughed. After Allen spoke to each class about the march at noon, he didn't sense much new enthusiasm.

At the end of period four, he and his students entered the hall; most of them headed for lunch instead of to the march. The noon stampede was about normal; Monique came out with her ninth-grade French class. Almost half of them stayed with her in the hall—four kids held up WE HAVE A DREAM signs they had made. Monique had to shout over the racket to him. "*Bonjour, professeur!* I'm coming down to see you off."

Only six kids from Allen's period-four class were standing nearby. "I guess this is all of them." He walked with Monique toward the middle stairs, his hand touching the back of her shoulder so she wouldn't get bumped or jostled by the kids.

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She spoke over the noise as they started downstairs. “Food is a tough competitor, but there should be a fair turnout. It’s about eighty-five out there—I would’ve melted.”

“Do you think it will go all right?”

“I admit to being nervous about it.”

When they came down to the first floor, most kids turned right for the east doors out to the cafeteria. The marchers went straight ahead through the foyer toward the front steps. Allen and Monique followed them outside to the waiting crowd. The student leaders and teachers were asking the kids to walk up to the north corner; Cecil was waiting there to escort them in his ’59 Chevy.

“Good luck, I’ll watch from here.” Monique backed up into the shade by the doors. Allen helped with the herding of more than a hundred mostly older kids toward the corner. Besides the staff sponsors, several parents were there and two local ministers in white collars. Three Kennedy campaign signs waved in the air, plus about twenty homemade pickets with WE HAVE A DREAM, WE SHALL OVERCOME, and FREEDOM NOW.

Allen joined Sharon, who was in dark-blue slacks and a plain summer blouse. She held up a hiking stick with a Kennedy placard secured to the top. As they assembled with the kids in front of Cecil’s car, Frank came up to him. “What did the judge do with your brother-in-law?”

Taken off-guard by Frank’s question in the middle of all the excitement, he quickly told him the results of the hearing. “. . . it’s been so busy that I never did thank you for all your help on Saturday.”

“Yeah, I’m glad your sister’s okay.” Abruptly changing subjects, he asked Allen and Sharon to be at the back of the line and not let it spread out very far. Frank hurried away, clapping to encourage the kids ahead.

The front of the procession finally moved from the corner, marching almost in unison, about six across, two older boys out front keeping time by striking their snare drums to the chant of “Freedom—now! Freedom—now! Freedom . . .”

The kids near Allen were mostly from the very low turnout of seventh-graders, relegated to bringing up the rear, including Sandra, Charmane, Marlon and a few other homeroom boys. The end of the procession finally started to move. Cecil followed about twenty feet behind in low gear.

As the middle of the demonstration approached the front of the school, four

students and Mitch struck up “We Shall Overcome” on various instruments. The marchers chimed in with a loud choral rendition of the protest song that Pete Seeger had adapted and expanded from an old Negro spiritual—information that Allen had chosen not to “teach” to anyone.

The last of the column started to pass the steps; Monique and a few other teachers applauded enthusiastically. Godina and several more adults, mostly classified staff, including Linda, just watched. They were surrounded by a small crowd of gawping kids; at least half of them, about twenty, ran out to join the end of the parade.

Allen turned to Sharon. “Too bad there aren’t more kids, but it’s going well.” She beamed. “Yes, wonderful.”

After a couple more minutes of exuberant marching, the front of the line circled the street corner. When the middle arrived there, all the noise stopped. The kids ahead held still for a moment, then they broke ranks, most of them running forward. Allen turned to Sharon. “What’s going on?”

She was wincing. “Doesn’t look good.” Cecil drove carefully around the last third of the march, all that remained. Allen ran off with some kids to the corner and looked down the side street. The old dry palm tree down there was engulfed in flames, like some torch for a storybook giant. Allen jogged down the block; Cecil was out of his car, running with Frank toward five or six boys, who cheered for the burning tree before they fled into the neighborhood. Frank and Cecil gave up the chase and returned to where Allen joined the remaining students, who milled around by the fence, glaring at the flames as the adults began urging them back to school.

They started to move slowly away as the police and firemen showed up. Allen called to a small group of older boys walking just ahead. “Any of you guys see how it started?”

“Some punk with a California candle.” The others agreed with him, sounding just as aggravated.

“How about a name?”

They didn’t answer. Allen got back up to his room as the passing bell rang. A few period-five kids began to show up right away. He considered letting them watch the fire trucks for a minute, but this was one of the two classes that had trashed the room the day before. A couple of boys came in talking about how the fire was *so cool*.

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Allen glared at them and some others who were at the windows. "Sit down, now!" About half of the large class was missing at the tardy bell. He asked a few kids who had started writing to stop; two girls and a boy came in late. Allen pointed out the mess in the room, throwing doors and drawers around a little and warning them that it was an automatic suspension to forge a signature on a stolen tardy slip. ". . . and you guys are going to clean up half of this mess—period six will do the rest."

Randall, the boy who wrote about the substitute, spoke up without raising his hand. "You're all mad about the fire, Mister Greene. Most of us here didn't do any of this."

Allen took a long deep breath. "Yeah, probably so." He sighed again. "All right, you guys come on up to these piles and try to find your notebooks, then go ahead with fluency time. If you can't find it, here's extra paper." While they got up, Allen took some cleaning spray he borrowed from Monique and started to scrub some graffiti off of the wall. A minute or two later, some kids to his left were sorting through the two large piles and straightening the mess in the cabinet; others worked on fixing the file boxes.

A girl took the spray bottle from his hand. "I'll do this, Mister Greene." He turned around. The kids not cleaning up were writing, and not one of them had drifted over to the window to watch the firemen. He saved some of the cleaning for sixth period—twenty-one of them showed up, and most of them were also cooperative.

Sandra, Charmane and ten more students who came for seventh period got right to work on their writing prompt, unaware of Allen grinning at them. Between the kids and Trudy, how was it possible to be so high or low so many times in one week?

That evening, he called the landlord, forfeited his deposit and still had to pay another month's rent. At least there would be no big hurry to get his larger things out; he could concentrate on helping Trudy move and settle in.

Allen slept in on Saturday morning, then moved his bird, school stuff, some clothes and toiletries back down to the house. He took another load on Sunday, then went over to Dan's and drove Trudy home. Though glad to see Pedro, she started talking about getting a big dog. She insisted that Allen stay in the spare bedroom, not down in the cave, because she had decided to use half of her bedroom for the baby. Trudy's next big idea was a vegetable garden in the space behind the house where their mom used to grow hollyhocks. After sharing all of her plans, she gave Allen a stern "big-sister" look and dictated some household chores for him to handle.

While he worked on his lessons that night, even his school challenges seemed to be mitigated by the return of the feisty "old" Trudy. Feeling pretty good about a lot of things, Allen made a solemn decision that he would ask Linda to go out.

His positive weekend was offset right away by a dreary Monday at school, accentuated by smoggy grey overcast and the beginning of school-wide testing during extended homeroom every morning that week. Allen looked for an opportunity to speak with Linda, but after two failed attempts, he felt like he was stalking her and let it go for later.

Between sixth and seventh period of the normal afternoon schedule, a long white dual-cab pick-up and a flatbed truck loaded with building materials

rolled right onto the black macadam and parked by the cafeteria. He let the Creative Writing class go to the windows for a minute to watch the LATHAM CONSTRUCTION COMPANY crew. Three men organized tools, lumber, and roof trusses; two others began to form an eight-by-eight square on the asphalt with concrete foundation blocks. The new booth would be a bit farther from the cafeteria and have about half the area of the old one.

“What’s going on?” Darrel asked no one in particular.

Charmane answered him, pointing below. “Don’t you ever listen to anything? See that? It says *Latham*—that’s her dad’s company putting up the new popcorn stand.”

Darrel looked at her helplessly. “Whose dad?”

Charmane quickly explained the Latham family’s largesse, then she turned to Allen. “If they wanted to spend all that money, why don’t they buy us something we need like calculators or new microscopes?”

Darrel grinned. “I like popcorn.” Before Charmane could ridicule the boy again, Allen sent the kids back to their seats to start writing. He told them they could check out the new popcorn stand later.

Just before the end of the hour, everyone went over to the windows. Allen, whose carpentry never surpassed a crooked shoeshine box he made in wood shop, was impressed that the small booth was already standing on the blocks, the walls connected with beams. Monique came in after school to see the new construction and to give him the names of some reliable subs.

“Hopefully, I won’t need another sub, but thanks. This testing is a joke, Monique—half my boys finished early and slept. I didn’t think I’d ever see this place as dead as it was today.”

“That’s how it goes during testing week—just stay alert in the afternoons.”

After she left, Allen checked the clock. Since Linda worked forty-five minutes later than the teachers, his plan was to go down to the office at four o’clock and maybe walk out with her. Trying to concentrate on the papers he was correcting, he kept watching the minute hand creep along toward the twelve. Before Allen left, he looked out. They were already beginning to slap a coat of white paint on the new booth.

He paused near the office with his box. Linda was there, typing with such dispatch that he couldn’t hear the individual keys striking the paper. Allen walked in as if heading for his mail, although he had checked it three times that day.

She glanced up at him. "Afternoon, Mister Greene."

"Afternoon." He smiled, and she resumed her furious typing. He went into his mailbox and took out two papers—they trembled in his hand. After returning to the office, he put his box on the counter and removed the lid. Linda was packing up to go. Allen dropped the papers inside, his hand still shaking as he put on the lid. In her pastel-yellow summer pantsuit, she opened and came through the small door in the counter, holding a mid-sized brown leather purse.

"Heading out, Miss Watson?" Allen opened the office door and backed up at the same time with his box to hold it for her.

"Yes, thank you."

They exited the school's inner and outer front doors. He opened each one for her, Linda smiling at his good manners. Had he been polite to the point of playing the fool? Half expecting someone to show up and ruin his big moment, there was no one nearby as they came to the driveway together.

Before he got up his gumption, she spoke first. "How is your sister doing, Allen?"

Allen—man. "Fine, thanks. I'm moving back in with her for now."

"They're separating?"

"She's divorcing him."

"Oh."

"Do you like the ocean?"

"Excuse me?"

Smooth move. "Uh, I was wondering if Saturday you'd like to take a ride down toward Laguna—I know a good place to eat near the beach."

They stopped by the booth, and she turned to him. "That sounds very nice. What time?" she asked with a neutral smile, but he couldn't hold eye contact.

He tried to face her. "Pick you up at four?"

"Okay." Linda made a broader smile, then took a pen and small writing pad from her purse. She wrote for several moments. "Here's the address, phone, and directions—you take the Santa Monica."

"Okay, great." He took the paper but didn't look at it.

"Do you know my first name, Allen?"

"Sure."

She smiled. "Well, I think it's okay to use it out here."

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“Okay, I’ll see you Saturday then, Linda.”

“You never know, there might be a chance to say hello between now and then.” She chuckled good-naturedly.

Speak, Bozo. “Right, see you tomorrow.”

“Bye.” She walked to some cars parked near the booth, stopping at a new light-yellow two-door Malibu. Allen shuffled slowly away, stalling for her to drive off so she couldn’t see him walk over to his old Volvo at the other side of the lot.

Wanting to click his heels, he settled for half-shouting, “Holy shit!” Then he checked Linda’s paper. Her directions would take him to Baldwin Hills, an area of L.A. he didn’t know other than hearing it mentioned on TV.

Still on his natural high, he drove the freeway scarcely paying attention to the bad traffic and another grim war report on the five-o’clock news. After greeting Trudy and Pedro at home, he spread out his schoolwork for later. He found two sharp pencils and a few sheets of typing paper, then took care of collecting and putting out the trash. While Trudy started dinner, Allen spent the time writing and re-writing a haiku until he was okay with it, proper syllable counts and all:

*Nature’s beauty shies
From the stunning black eyes of
A girl named Pretty.*

Trudy waddled into the dining room. He folded the poem and grinned sheepishly, his face completely flush.

“Dinner. My gosh, Allen, what’s with you?”

“Nothing.”



During the dull testing in the mornings that week, the kids laughed at his mistakes and distractedness. Trying to keep his mind off of Saturday, he immersed himself in his teaching during the afternoons.

Allen saw Linda two or three times each day. She was the same as always, except she said his first name once when it was quiet. He chided himself for his silly disappointment that her routine, unlike his, was unaffected. In the office on Wednesday, he discovered that his shirt pocket was empty and ran

up to the room, mortified that someone might find his sentimental haiku. He found the paper in the fruit box and secured it in his wallet.

On Friday morning, Allen met Monique in the hallway after his duty. She had been absent on Thursday for an outpatient procedure. "Is everything okay, Monique?"

"Fine, *chéri*, just some ol' lady stuff. Could you tell how things went in my room?"

"I checked in on your sub. She seemed fine, just had a question on the testing. The only excitement all day was a fight after school, but I don't think anybody ended up in the meat wagon."

"That's good." She laughed a little. "I haven't heard *meat wagon* since the war."

"From my dad, I guess."

"Well, hopefully the lid will stay on next week."

"Yeah." He paused. "Monique?"

"Yes?"

"Um, Linda's going out with me tomorrow night."

She smiled. "How very nice, but you look worried."

"I guess. Any suggestions?"

"Sure. Have fun and be yourself."

Allen went home after school on time for once and recited the *puddy tat* line to Pedro before dinner. He and Trudy watched an old Gary Cooper movie that evening, but he lost track of the simple story line twenty minutes into the show.

Saturday morning he took the vacuum and an extension cord out to the driveway, then gathered buckets, rags, and soap to do what he could to spruce up his jalopy, wishing he'd swallowed his pride before and asked Rick to paint it. He finished the car and was putting things away in the kitchen when Trudy walked in like a misshapen gourd with legs.

"So, who's the lucky girl, Allen?"

He shrugged. "Think you're pretty smart don't you?"

"No, it's about time you went out. You could've borrowed the Ladybug."

"Yeah, that'd be perfect."

"So who is it?"

"Linda."

"Oh? Nice girl, and what a looker. At least I don't have to worry about you running off."

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“What do you mean by that?”

“My, aren’t we touchy? I don’t mean because she’s black. Sorry, I’ll shut up—you’ll figure it out.”

“Crap, figure what out?”

“You’re too damn serious—it’s just a date. Relax and have a good time.”

“Man, you and Monique.”

That afternoon, the barber trimmed Allen’s hair, moustache, and sideburns a little more than what he asked for. Then he went home and cleaned up but couldn’t decide what to wear. His only “nice” outfit was a dark-blue sweater with a dress shirt, but it was too hot for that, so he ended up in a light-blue shirt tucked into black half-bells. Self-conscious about his fat roll, he walked out to the car, rehashing Trudy’s cryptic remark.

He drove the Harbor Freeway to the Santa Monica, half-listening to the radio until they played Joan Baez singing a Dylan song that Allen didn’t know. The traffic made it difficult to pick up the lyrics except for its melodic but strident refrain, “Love is just a four-letter word.”

Whatever that means. He took the La Brea exit, drove a few blocks, then turned left and wasn’t all that far from USC and the L.A. Coliseum, which he always approached from the east through a shoddy commercial area. Allen soon came to a higher income neighborhood—a realtor’s office had BALDWIN HILLS on its sign. He went on a ways, found the street and turned, starting uphill past modern ramblers and two-story houses.

The few people he saw were black, starting with a boy and girl who could just as well have been Marshall kids if not for their shiny bikes and sporty new clothes. He saw a dark elderly woman with very white hair tending her manicured yard, and then a man playing catch with two boys in Little League jerseys.

He pulled over near a corner to check if he had confused an *Avenue* with a *Street*. He hadn’t, and he was only a few numbers away from her address. Allen put the Volvo in neutral, set the hand brake, closed his eyes and took some deep breaths. All he could hear was the motor idling, so he looked out again.

A middle-aged man eyed him suspiciously from a Spanish-tiled veranda. Allen drove up the block. Linda’s car was parked in a long driveway before a closed garage by a white two-story house. It had four columns out front and rows of neatly trimmed decorative shrubs around showy flower beds and a big lawn.

It's Ozzie and Harriet. My God—her parents' place. He parked in the street and took another long breath. Allen got out and walked slowly up to the tall ornate door. What would he say if her mother or father answered? He pushed the button, then flinched, startled a bit by the first loud chime.

Linda came to the door, smiling. "Hi, Allen—all set."

He tried to smile back around his exhale. She stepped out and turned to lock the door. Her short canary-colored skirt showed off her shapely legs, and a matching thin velour pullover looked achingly soft. Linda's light-brown Afro had been treated to make it a bit puffer, and her gold necklace's single pearl just touched the line in the sweater formed by her bra.

"Allen?" She was touching the fleecy coat on her arm.

"Yes?"

"I can't decide if I'll need this near the ocean today."

"Maybe later on." It was well over eighty outside and he hadn't even brought his windbreaker. He waited so Linda could walk first down the driveway, carrying her coat and purse.

She stopped by the Malibu and looked toward the street. "Is that your car, Allen?"

"Afraid so, but it's clean."

"I'm sure it is, but should we take mine? Just to be more comfortable, since we're taking a ride."

"Okay." Acting as if her suggestion didn't bother him, he opened the passenger door for her. As he walked behind the car, Linda slid over on the bench seat a little toward the driver's side. If she sat right by him, it would take even more guts later to reach into his pocket and read the poem to her.

Allen got in. She hadn't moved much closer, settling near the middle of the seat to hand him the keys. Putting the automatic in reverse, he backed up to the street and started off, the gas tank full.

They began a standard first-date conversation, which was fine because she knew way more about him after witnessing the fracas with Rick. Linda said she attended public elementary before going to private schools and a local Christian college. She was visiting her parents for the weekend and still lived with her college roommate, Esther, who went to some of the same schools that she and Mitch did. She interrupted herself to give directions to the Pacific Coast Highway. Not wanting to hear any more familiar talk about Mitch, Allen acted half-lost, asking about cross streets.

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Linda seemed both modest and proud when she began to talk about her bi-racial parents. Her father was a celebrated doctor in the black community, her mother a top Southern California real estate broker. “. . . and she also manages the house and my little brother. Anyway, I’m going back next year for my Master’s in Business. I’ll probably intern with my mom, but I’m more interested in securities.”

“Why the year at Marshall?”

“Allen, you just stay on Western now.” She sighed. “My dad says I’ve been slumming it, trying to get to know *real* black people. Mitch agrees, maybe they’re right”

Mitch gave Allen another pang of jealousy.

“. . . I guess I’ve found out that I’m not really cut out to deal constantly with so much conflict and despair.”

“You’d never know it, seeing how you work with people.”

She smiled as they waited for a red light. “Well, thank you. I put on a good front. Don’t get me wrong, I very much admire the dedication I see from some of the staff, but for me it’s an accomplishment just to make it to the end of the year.”

He started off from the light. “Yeah, that’s about the same for me, except the front I put on is acting tough. And I don’t have much choice about coming back.”

“I know. Will you stay in teaching?”

“I’m not sure. One thing I do know, I’ve learned a lot from Monique, Frank, Sharon, and Miss Dorsey.”

“Well, you found some of the best people there. Allen, do you mind if we talk about something else besides the school?”

He was going to ask what she thought of Ishimoto, but he said, “Sure, that’s fine.” Allen made the left turn onto the Pacific Coast Highway. “Okay, here we go.” They smiled at each other, then he touched his shirt pocket and the poem inside. He asked if she had traveled much.

“Oh, I love to.” She spoke for a long time about an annual family vacation to Hawaii and a regular Christmas visit they took to New York to be with her father’s family. As she told him about her other trips in the U.S. and Europe, he couldn’t offer much but a nod or a smile.

“. . . listen to me go on. Where have you traveled, Allen?”

“Mostly Arizona and Oregon—one trip to the east coast, then Puerto Rico. I want to travel more, though.”

“Why were you in Puerto Rico?”

“Peace Corps.”

“Oh.”

He was about to tell her that he was a dropout, but she had turned away and was looking ahead at a beach community they were approaching. He spotted a road sign outside. “Speaking of travel, we passed Huntington Beach—we’re now in lovely Orange County.”

“Yes, where else can they brag about two attractions like Disneyland and Knott’s Berry Farm?”

“I’m okay with Donald and Goofy, but not the other place.”

“Mom and I like to go there for the country-style food.”

“And your dad?”

“He won’t go there again.”

“I doubt it’s the food.”

“Yes, you’re right.” She looked out at a hint of dusk. “This is one of my favorite little towns. Would you mind if we stopped for a minute?”

“No, not at all.” He turned off and found an open spot on a bustling block of faux-quaint shops selling clothes, antiques, and art. There was also a bakery and a small false-front bookstore amidst the eucalyptus, lemon trees, flower boxes, benches, decorative wrought iron and old-fashioned streetlights.

They got out and walked by an art store. The paintings were treatments of shorelines, seagulls and nautilus shells. Linda walked right into a chic women’s clothing shop. He waited for her to look at some scarves until she put on a garish yellow one with brown paisleys, tying it jauntily around her slender neck. She raised her dark brows. “Look all right?”

Since any old dishtowel would look good on her, he just nodded with a smile. She paid for it, then they went back to the car. He turned onto the beach road and glanced at her. “Are you planning to travel this summer?”

“Yes, Esther and I are going to Paris—my first time to be there for more than a day or two. I’ll relax and think about things.” The car came to a curve, where she checked the view of the ocean, about a quarter-mile below. “Now there’s a postcard sky.”

Allen kept from saying that all the crap in the air guaranteed a colorful sunset. “Do you want to stop and watch it?”

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"If you'd like. There's a turnout just ahead."

"You really know this area."

"Not so well past here. My mom has some land a few miles back—half in my name, half in my brother's."

He found the wide spot on the next curve and pulled off. "There, a few more minutes left."

"Our land isn't quite this good—the view here makes it prime residential. This will be developed in the next few years."

"That's too bad."

She gave him a blank look, then stared outside. Not an hour earlier, he might have taken the subtle orange rays on her delicate face as a cue to read his poem, but now he touched his chest pocket and re-creased the paper.

"Allen, I want to tell you something." She turned to him. "So there won't be any misunderstandings."

"Okay."

She faced the sunset again. "You're very nice, and I'm enjoying this a lot, but I want you to know that Mitch has asked me to marry him. He's asked since we were kids—he, Esther and I have always laughed about it. He's serious now, but I told him I'd go out with other guys until I got back from Paris, and then we'd talk. Sorry for being so abrupt, but I just wanted you to know."

He made sure that his exhale didn't come out as a sigh. "No, I appreciate it. I like Mitch. I think it's too bad he's leaving the school."

She turned to him, her face as close to angry as he had seen. "Well, I don't. He's such a sweet man and gets so much aggravation he doesn't deserve from the, um, hoods."

"True, but a lot of kids think he's a good teacher."

"I should hope so, the time he gives them. To be honest, I'm part of the reason he's leaving, and I don't feel guilty about it. By changing careers, Mitch eliminates two things I can't stand—the abuse he takes, and the fact that he's a brilliant musician getting paid peanuts. I'll always be loyal to him as a close friend."

"Do you think he'll be happy selling insurance?"

"Are you criticizing him?"

"No, I'm in the same boat, just finding my way."

"He has his own jazz group and does the music for our church—I think

he'll be happier in a new career. I don't know yet if we'll be together, but we seem to want the same things."

"Does that include *your* career?"

"Well, he's not against it."

"And he's for a big house, private schools for the kids, and the right church."

"Pretty close, you make that all sound like something bad."

"Sorry, I guess I do." They silently watched the last slit of sun melt away. "Well, now that we've talked about all this, I would still enjoy taking you to dinner."

"Thank you. Yes, I'm starved."

He drove off down the coast road. Although he doubted his chances with her even more, Allen's infatuation remained strong enough that he was silently rationalizing their differences. "Do you like Mexican food?"

She said she did, and they chatted about food preferences for several minutes until he pulled into the parking lot of a small stucco restaurant right off the highway. He hurried around the car to open her door. "This little joint doesn't look like much, but they make great burritos."

They walked below a red neon sign, MARCO'S CANTINA, then into an alcove decorated with faded *piñatas* and *sarapes*, a tall green plaster saguaro, and a spray-painted gold Aztec calendar. They stood by a PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED placard. No one approached them right away. The distant bar was packed, but the restaurant section wasn't half-full, some open tables nearby. Allen asked a pimple-faced busboy to let someone know they were seating themselves. The kid shrugged and pushed his cart away.

After peering into the kitchen, Linda whispered, "Never saw a Mexican restaurant without Mexicans, not even the cook."

"It's okay—the food's good." He led her to a vacant booth away from the windows, where they sat across from each other and made small talk for a couple of minutes. A middle-aged blonde waitress in a wide-skirted red, white, and green outfit walked down the aisle by the windows. He called, "Ma'am?" and raised a forefinger. He said it again, a bit louder, but she scooted away.

"Allen, let's just go."

"Must be short-handed, I'll check." He stood up before she could answer,

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left, then came back a minute or so later. “She gave me a dirty look and said Marco would be over. What’s with this place tonight?”

Linda briefly closed her eyes, then shook her head like Charmane sometimes did for one of Darrel’s naive questions.

Shit! “*That’s* what’s going on?”

“Keep your voice down. Let’s go, please.” Linda got right up. An older white couple in a nearby booth scowled at her.

Allen stood, glowering back at them. “You people have a nose problem?”

They pretended not to hear him. A fat, dark-haired guy, maybe Italian or Greek, walked up in a black suit in time to hear Allen’s insult. “I’m Marco, and I want you outta here now, or she calls the cops.” He nodded to the cash register, where the waitress held up a phone. Linda headed for the exit.

Allen pointed at Marco. “There are laws against this now, and I’m damn well going to report it.”

Linda was gone—Marco made a dialing motion to the waitress. “Don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m telling the sheriff I got a hippie yelling at my staff and customers. They’re on the way.” A few nearby patrons applauded.

Allen started for the door. “Screw you, Mussolini.”

Allen drove off slowly, telling Linda that the cops were coming.

"Then maybe you should get moving." She was wearing her coat now, huddled right next to the passenger door.

"I wouldn't mind talking to them, especially outside of that damn place."

"Why? They'd just laugh, or arrest you."

He glanced at her. "Yeah, we are in Orange County."

"It would probably be the same in L.A."

Instead of going up the beach road, he headed inland, driving at the speed limit.

"Allen, you shouldn't have said that to those people."

"When I left, the bastards were clapping for *Marco*."

She raised her brows at the expletive. "Telling them off didn't change anything."

"Maybe not, but they deserved it."

Linda just watched the mostly unlit countryside until Allen found a new section of interstate and drove north for a while. They decided to stop at a fast-food joint; he ordered burgers and fries while she used the bathroom, then they ate quietly in the parking lot.

She mostly watched the lights on the way back to L.A., chatting a little about landmarks they passed. Allen let go of some of his anger but couldn't think of much to say.

He got out with her at the house and escorted her to the door, apologizing

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for making the incident worse at Marco's.

"I just try to avoid that sort of thing. I'm sorry if I was snippy with you."

"You weren't. I owe you a decent dinner sometime."

The front door opened, and Linda looked relieved. A short pretty blonde in her late forties stood there in shorts and a blue T-shirt. "Hi, dear. I heard you talking."

"This is Allen, Mom."

He stepped up to shake hands. The Pepperdine College logo on her shirt had a tower with a holy cross. Her sulking brown eyes said, *Fat chance you have with my daughter.*

Barely hearing her mumbled greeting, Allen released the woman's small clammy hand. "Glad to meet you, Mrs. Watson."

She faced Linda. "Your father's waiting up for you, dear. Good night." She closed the door.

Linda thanked him. He had already dismissed the idea of a customary first-date peck on the cheek. They said good night and Allen left.

The freeways were busy but moving very fast, making for a quick but gloomy trip home. He went in and jabbered with Pedro until Trudy entered the room, asking if he had a good time.

"A good time." He scoffed and put on the cage cover. "You were right. That's how I should've looked at it. 'Night." He walked into his room, tore up the haiku, and went to bed.



Dan helped him finish moving his scant furniture back to the house on Sunday. Allen said nothing about his date. They worked quickly, then he concentrated on student papers for most of the afternoon.

When he quietly said good morning to Linda in the office before school on Monday, she was predictably courteous but distant. Allen had forgotten it was April Fools and snapped out of his funk halfway through duty when he saw the kids pulling the same old pranks from his school days. *What's that under your chin?* and *Hey, your shoe's untied!* felt strangely comforting.

After duty, his homeroom boys came in, pranking each other noisily. He had recently lost two more of them to suspension—Aaron for fighting in the

coliseum, and another boy who missed his mark with a peashooter and hit a cook on the cheek. Of his twenty-six remaining boys, nineteen were present when they stood after the tardy bell—some of them mumbled the Pledge along with the kids on the intercom. Allen took roll and let the boys talk before announcements, but he had to referee a dispute over a prank and move the squabblers apart. When the PA buzzed again, he told them all to sit down and be quiet.

A male student droned away on the intercom in slow, choppy sentences. “. . . and the popcorn stand is selling red licorice today. During period seven on Tuesday, the ninth-grade boys will play the faculty in softball and . . .” Frank had told Allen that this annual rite was a lame attempt to counteract spring fever—what it amounted to was Van Burton drubbing the boys with a team of PE teachers and non-staff ringers. “. . . and we think the ninth-graders are going to win this year.” The boy made a stilted laugh. “So watch out, faculty.”

“Who cares?” Marlon’s remark started the laughter again.

Mrs. Ishimoto took over on the intercom with a lilting voice. “. . . and I’m sure the ninth-graders will do their best, but I have to warn them that Mister Van Burton promised to hit two homeruns tomorrow.” Ishimoto paused, then nonsensically began a scold on poor attendance to the kids who showed up. Most of the boys glared at the black box as she changed subjects to explain how extended homeroom that day was for make-up tests.

When she finally stopped talking, Allen held up answer sheets and pencils. “All right guys, most of you have one test left—a few have more. Those who are finished can write, do homework, or read.” He pointed to a shelf of multi-level books, mostly borrowed from libraries. “We’ll start in about ten minutes—you can talk quietly, but stay in your seats while I pass out tests. Do *not* begin.” A cherry bomb blasted from one of the floors below, rattling the windows. Some of the boys snickered.

Allen was halfway through the rows when there was a knock, then Frank stuck his head into the room. “Mister Greene, can we talk out here for just a second?”

Reminding his boys that he would be right at the door, Allen went out to the hall, puzzled by the uncharacteristic grin on Frank’s face. His denim pocket had a BOBBY ’68 button along with Rosa Parks. Kennedy’s bumper stickers were now ubiquitous at Marshall, the kids slapping them on notebooks,

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lockers and any other surface they could get away with.

“Sharon’s watching my homeroom, I just have a minute.”

Allen kept one eye on the boys. “So what’s up?” Impish little T.R. sneaked over to Marlon, whose head was down.

“First, this is for you.” He gave him the envelope they used to exchange Ronnie’s poetry.

“Thanks.” T.R. flicked Marlon’s ear and dashed back to his seat as Frank began talking quietly. Marlon sat up, turned to T.R., then just shook his head. Allen re-focused on Frank.

“. . . election—times are a-changing, like the man says.”

“Sorry, I missed the first part of that, Frank.”

“Jesus, LBJ halting the bombing and quitting the election.”

“Right, that was something.”

His brows furrowed, Frank looked right at him. “Something? It means the protests have paid off—students, women, vets, Doctor King—all of us.”

Allen tapped the envelope on the portal because T.R. was bothering somebody else. “Yeah, I know. I have all I can handle right here.”

Frank chafed at his response. “It’s all related, Allen. See that little guy?” He pointed emphatically at Darrel in the front row, his belly touching the desk. “He’ll be in the war in a few years if it isn’t stopped. As bad as LBJ is, what if he’d lost in ’64?”

“I was twenty—couldn’t vote.”

“But old enough to go to Vietnam.” He sighed. “Look, I came to talk to you about *our* walkout. Are you still with us?”

“Yes, but I have a couple of questions.”

“Has anyone from the Alliance spoken to you?”

“I got a pamphlet that says to honor the contract and don’t listen to agitators.” Allen smiled a little.

“Yeah, the Alliance won’t even invite you to join—they don’t consider you to be a teacher.”

“Some truth to that, right?”

“No, your lack of experience should be irrelevant as far as representation.” He paused for two kids to walk by.

Allen glanced at his homeroom again. “Okay, so how’s it going to work?”

“We leave after period six on Thursday. It screws up the last hour, mostly

electives—the school will probably run a movie. We hope to have thirty teachers plus some parents and others. We'll take the same route the students did, rally on the front steps, then maybe go around again. We're not officially encouraging it, but some kids will go out with us."

"What do I do about Dorsey?"

"She's in both organizations, but she won't be in the walkout. It's Nash and his pals who might hassle you." Frank started walking away. "See you, fellow agitator."

All the boys finished testing by eleven. Allen took out word games and was playing anagrams with Marlon and some others when there was a loud slam from the direction of Monique's room.

He walked to the door and looked out but didn't see anything unusual until Monique's red hair bobbed past her portal, followed by a streak of yellow tempera powder. He hurried into the hall as Monique swung her door open and came out, her dark suit a maelstrom of dry orange and yellow paint. She seemed more frail than usual but spoke calmly. "I need some help, please."

He took a step toward his boys, pointed, and said, "Stay put, I'll be *right* back." Allen left his door open and crossed the hall to her. "What's going on?"

Without answering, she went in with him. The gaudy paint dusted the desks, floors, and tables; the aisles were littered with construction paper, testing sheets, and yellow pencils. About twenty girls leaned against the long counter by the windows, their bewildered eyes wide open. Charmane and some others turned to the teachers; the rest were watching three classmates at the chalkboard, two of them drawing florid, looping, undecipherable graffiti in pastel chalk. The third girl was playing teacher, directing them with Monique's pointer.

He moved forward, Monique at his side. The three girls turned around—two of them were a foot taller than their teacher. "All right, *what's* going on here?" It was his most authoritarian tone—the two big girls laughed; the small one scrambled to sit in the nearest desk.

The girl at the board kept drawing, the one who was playing teacher hiked her pink skirt slightly to sit on the corner of Monique's desk. Physically mature, she had short processed hair and a plain light-brown face with heavy makeup. She grinned, directing the wooden pointer at Allen. "Frenchy's back with bad Mister Greene." She rapped the pointer on a desk, breaking it. "Oops." The nearby small girl snickered, then got up and ran back to the chalkboard. The

girls by the windows remained a quiet and rapt audience.

With half of the broken stick, the ringleader pointed at Allen again, raising her brows in a pretend flirt. “Heard ’bout you, Mister Greene.” Peripherally, Allen saw she was crossing her legs; he focused on her face.

She scoffed. “Ha, you looked, ofay—jus’ another white boy who likes to look at—”

“Knock that crap off!” Allen turned guiltily to Charmane and the others.

The leader gave him a smug look. “Oooo, now listen to those *lang-widge-arts*. That today’s lesson, Mister Greene?” Her two followers hooted with laughter.

Allen pointed at her. “You want to go to the office now or wait for security to come get you?”

“Shit.” She hopped down from the desk. “We’re goin’, all right—goin’ out.” She tossed the stick on the floor and turned to skin palms with the tall girl at the board. The smaller girl laughed again, mimicking Allen as the three of them bantered and strutted for the door. The tall quiet one who did most of the drawing turned back and said, “Bye, Frenchy.” The three of them walked out, guffawing.

Monique turned to the others by the window. “Well, that was entertaining.” They stood up silently. “Thank you, girls.” Monique walked to the front of the room and reached up with half of her pointer to push the intercom button.

Allen faced the girls. “A little help for Mrs. Morgan here, please.” He turned to Monique. “I’ll get my boys—we’ll be back to help out.”

Monique sighed and bent over to pick up some paper. “Thank you.”

Back in his room, Allen discovered that one boy had left—nobody volunteered anything about his disappearance. “All right, we’re going over to go help Mrs. Morgan’s class.” He reported the truant boy on the PA, then they walked across the hall.

A few boys laughed at the mess in Monique’s room. Some of it was already cleaned up, and two girls were sweeping. Using a whiskbroom, Charmane was trying to brush the bright powder from her teacher’s suit. Marlon, Darrell and some other boys pitched in until the lunch bell.

Back to regular classes in the afternoon, Allen tried to teach patiently around more silliness and harmless pranks. After sixth period, the Creative Writing students seemed to come in more seriously than the previous two groups. They finished the writing prompt, then Darrel, unaware of a streak of chocolate on one cheek, raised his hand. “Mister Greene, I don’t get what’s

goin' on Thursday with the teachers."

"You mean the walkout?"

"Yeah. Are you in it?"

"Yes."

"I heard it's gonna be this period. What do *we* do?"

"Just sit there and cry, Tubby," a boy named Henry muttered from Rupert's old seat by the window. His tall frame attired in black from shirt to shined shoes, he was the only cohort of Rupert's still in the class.

Allen glared at him. "First warning for you, Henry." He turned to Darrel. "The school will cover the class."

"You have permission to leave?"

"No, we don't."

Henry pointed at Allen. "I get it. When teachers want somethin', it's okay to break the rules."

A boy near Darrel raised his hand but didn't wait to be called on. "Is it true the teachers just want more money?"

"That's what I heard," a girl said.

"All right, hang on, I'll tell you what I know." Allen waited for quiet and saw Sandra scowling at the class. "The teachers are divided about the walkout, and I made my choice." He explained the two teachers' groups, trying not to make it sound like good guys versus bad. He wrote ODORS on the board. Some kids laughed at the word, then Allen explained the grievance that corresponded to each letter in the acronym.

A couple of kids raised a hand, but Henry, combing his short Afro, spoke out. "See? All they're worried about is money and tellin' us what to do." A few others grumbled in agreement.

Sandra turned to the class. "Allayall hush. Mister Williamson explained it same as Mister Greene, and same as Mister Lee. Mister Williamson said it's a non-violent protest like Doctor King's. If what they're protestin' means money for these no-good schools, then so what? You know who's all cryin' over nothin'?" Sandra paused for effect. "Van Burton and Snash." She almost spit the words in disgust.

Snash? Allen turned away to hide his amusement.

"An' that ol' fool *Nee-grow*, Jackson—oh, an' Anders." At mention of the librarian, Sandra's nostrils flared as if she smelled something rotten—she

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continued over the laughter. “I see ’em all talkin’ to each other. You believe *them* or Mister Williamson, Mister Lee and Mister Greene?” She didn’t wait for a response. “Won’t see *me* goin’ to no last period on Thursday.”

Charmane stood halfway up. “Me either, and Mrs. Morgan said the same as Mister Greene.” A few kids called out with *Yeab!* or *That’s right!* Henry looked sourly outside.

Allen waited, then spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. “We are not asking you to march with us. You’d be counted truant.”

Sandra faced him. “No matter—that fool startin’ a fire in a palm tree don’t take away *our* right to protest.”

The next morning, just twenty boys came in sluggishly to homeroom as if the usual Monday languor had been April-fooled to Tuesday. Some of them slept through Latham's effusive patter on the intercom about a coming awards ceremony.

Ishimoto took over and explained procedures for the ballgame last period. ". . . students on the study hall list are to be taken by period-seven teachers to Harding Hall on the way to the field. Students assigned to detention must . . ." The boys weren't listening. ". . . anyone who doesn't show up is truant and will serve detention on Wednesday. Have a nice day."

Marlon grinned at Allen. "Hey, Mister Greene, what position are you playing in the game?"

"I'm playing left out, rooting for the ninth-graders."

As the day progressed, attendance declined more. After the bell rang at the end of sixth period, Allen overheard some kids saying they were going home. On the way outside, he and Monique had less than thirty period-seven students between them. They dropped off eight more in the cafeteria, then started for the end of the building, where a few teachers were heading back to Main. Walking well behind their listless kids, Allen turned to her. "I assume it was quiet in your homeroom this morning."

"With those three gone, like cherubs in church."

He nodded ahead to their group and spoke quietly. "Do a lot of kids always disappear for this deal?"

"Yes, part of the game-day tradition."

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“Why does the school even do it?”

“Greg wanted to cancel two years ago, but staff and the kids voted to keep it—anything for an easy day.” They passed the auditorium. “Allen, did your date with Linda go okay?”

He scoffed a little. “Do you know much about her family?” She shook her head, and he explained.

“So there was, uh, an economic gap you weren’t expecting.”

“That, and more.” He mentioned Linda’s uncertain marital plans, then told her some details of the row at the restaurant. “Although we didn’t hit it off, she’s a good person. At least we can face each other and say hello.”

“That’s good. It sounds like you both learned something.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it.”

They came to the baseball field—not even half of the student body had ended up there. The kids sat on the old bleachers or the grass and mostly ignored the adults’ easy rout of ten less-than-enthused ninth-grade boys.



By Wednesday, attendance was better but the weather turned summer-hot. Allen spoke to his classes about the teachers’ walkout the next day, explaining that Mister Williamson had made an arrangement with the principal for students to sign in at the march for social studies credit. Pretty much the same kids were either interested or apathetic. He had most of them work on the final draft of an old assignment.

Allen received another anti-demonstration pamphlet on Thursday morning before duty. Skirting the faculty room with his mail, he heard Anders browbeating a substitute about the walkout.

After the first-period tardy bell, Sandra hurried down the hall while Allen was putting out the absence slip. She was nearly out of breath and uncharacteristically disheveled in a rumpled blouse and messy makeup. “Mister Greene, I’m sorry. We stayed at my mom’s last night, and this morning she was, um—she wouldn’t let me call my aunt to pick up Melissa.” She exhaled loudly. “I had to call from the office.”

“Didn’t they give you a pass?”

“It was Mrs. Venable. That ol’ lady hates me.”

“Okay.” He put out his hands, palms down, to calm her.

She looked into the room, then spoke more quietly. “Sorry, I’m bothering everybody.”

“Thanks, they’re working now.” They went in. “That tardy is your freebie, Sandra. I have to send it in next time.”

“I know.” Pouting a bit, she walked over for her fluency folder, then to her seat. She started writing, making demonstrative periods at the end of sentences.

After a couple of minutes, he went over to her and whispered as she kept writing. “I think we can work something out with the phone. Today’s not a good day—maybe tomorrow after school when Charmane is here. We’ll see what we can do.”

“Thanks.” She looked up with a slight grin. “Mister Greene, my aunt’s bringing Melissa for the march today.” He returned a smile, then went on to help a boy who had his hand up.

During the day, many students were ambivalent about the teachers’ walk-out, but there was enough tension between some supporters and skeptics that Allen had to break up a couple of arguments that got out of hand.

Before the bell at the end of period six, Venable came on the speaker. “. . . a special movie next period for students, ‘20,000 Leagues Under the Sea’ . . .”

“That ol’ thing again,” one girl said while most of the boys looked pleased.

“. . . are to go to the auditorium and sign in with Mister Fogle. Those who will be with Mister Williamson can sign in outside of the office. Students who don’t sign in will be truant. Please wait now for the bell.”

The girl who was suspended for two days back in February for cussing at Allen raised her hand. “Yes, Pauline?”

The gangly girl pointed at him. “Y’all are walkin’ out now, right?”

“Some of us, yes—we discussed this again yesterday.”

“I wasn’t here. No detention if we go with the teachers?”

“If you sign in and stay with the march. Your social studies teacher might ask you to tell about it.” The bell rang at the end of his sentence. “Okay, that’s it—see you.”

Pauline stood up. “See you right now.”

A boy at the door shouted, “Anybody stays is chicken-shit!”

Pauline glared at him. “Fool, you jus’ cuttin’.”

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While the room emptied, Allen looked out at the warm spring day to gauge if it would be too hot for Monique. A normal between-class onslaught surged across the coliseum toward the auditorium. He put on his Pittsburgh Pirate cap and headed for the door.

After locking the room, Allen turned to Pauline and a few of his sixth-period kids waiting in the hall with some older students. Scores of others hurried back and forth past Frank, who had come upstairs during his last-period prep. In his bright dashiki, he held a furled sign under one arm and was telling students who weren't there for the walkout to go to the auditorium. Wrapped from head to sandals in a shimmering green Indian sari, a dark-eyed older lady was helping him. Apparently, Allen had wrongly assumed before that she was of Arabic descent.

Monique came out of her room in an embroidered white blouse, a full skirt with petticoats, and a crown of daisies trailed by a rainbow of long thin ribbons. She carried her closed red parasol under her other arm.

Allen smiled. "Very festive, Monique."

"*Jarwohl*, celebrating cultures! I'm actually Bavarian, you know."

"No, I didn't." He touched his cap. "Mine's baseball."

Frank turned from the kids. "Mister Greene, you can take one end of this sign when we get started." Staff members down the hall in both directions saw the strikers and turned for the north or south stairs like most of the students. Carrying some clipboards, Ron Lee joined them in regular clothes, but his long hair was cinched by a white headband with black Chinese symbols.

Allen spoke to him under his breath. "Hey, Lefty."

He smiled, holding up a clipboard. "Yeah, let's get going."

Frank led them away with about thirty kids. Two teachers were waiting at the second floor with nine or ten students, including Charmane. Most everyone chatted nervously as they descended the last flight and found about fifty more kids, several teachers and a few classified staff waiting in the foyer as the tardy bell rang. One woman wore the colorful finery for a Mexican *folklórico*; an elderly math teacher donned his Scottish tam. There were some Kennedy campaign placards and several homemade signs with NEW FUNDS FOR OLD SCHOOLS, and 3R's = FREEDOM, plus others from the students' march.

As Ron started the clipboards around to the kids, Allen and Frank

unfurled the sign. They held up a picket at each end of a four-by-eight precisely lettered banner: WE HAVE A DREAM—FREEDOM AND GOOD SCHOOLS. Allen grinned at Monique. “Good sign, Mrs. Morgan.”

Though he had less than twenty teachers, Frank didn’t look discouraged; he said to wait a minute for stragglers. Over half of the faculty members there were under forty, and every department was represented, including a PE teacher in her thirties, who arrived late in shorts to appreciative applause. Half of the black teachers showed up—Frank and Mitch plus two more who Allen didn’t know, an older woman who taught science, and a recently hired young male math substitute.

Mrs. Berg joined them in some brown and green lederhosen, complete with feathered Tyrolean hat. Sharon’s long limbs seemed only slightly thicker than her hiking stick; it had a sign at the top with ODORS and the five grievances. They gave the counselor a rousing cheer.

Sharon, Monique, Ron, and Mitch stayed with the kids as Allen and Frank dipped the sign and led the other staff into the office. Linda stopped typing to smile at them. Mrs. Ishimoto stood in a back corridor with a smoldering glare, arms folded.

Frank watched the vice-principal leave. “Mrs. Venable, our board plus these staff members are on unpaid leave for one hour.”

“Yes, Mister Williamson.” The heavy woman checked out Allen and some others through the top of her bifocals. “Mm, I do see a couple I wasn’t aware of.” She jotted names. “You have more out on the steps.” Her tone betrayed an inkling of support.

“Okay, let’s go.” The teachers followed Frank and Allen back into the busy foyer. He and Allen dipped the banner again for the front doors. “All right, let’s start with: New funds for old schools! New funds for old schools! New funds . . .”

They took up the chant and walked out to find a crowd of at least thirty additional kids, a few more teachers, about a dozen parents, and the same two ministers—all standing around until they saw the banner emerge from the school. They launched more homemade signs and Kennedy placards skyward and chimed in loudly, “New funds for . . .”

As the clipboards circulated among the kids on the steps, Frank held up his arms to stop the chant. “Okay, Channel Four said they’d be here, and the

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last thing we need is violence on the evening news. We have a police escort, but pass it on to watch for troublemakers.”

Frank resumed the chant, then he and Allen stepped down to the street with the banner, followed by the elongated crowd. They moved slowly for the corner, and another twenty or thirty excited kids ran along the sidewalks on both sides, some joining the protest while others darted in and out as teachers kept telling them to sign in or go to the auditorium.

A few feet behind the large banner, Sandra had joined them, striding arm and arm with Charmane, Monique, and Sharon. Sandra had the baby, all in Sunday ruffles, balanced on one hip. Allen started to call over to Frank that those five were about the cutest thing ever, but he thought better of it.

Marlon marched on the other side of the banner with a few boys from homeroom. Two L.A. squad cars waited at the corner; one pulled ahead and stayed about twenty yards in front of the procession, now at least a hundred and fifty strong. The line narrowed to about five across before turning the corner onto the side street that intersected the PE field and mostly two-bedroom stuccos and old frame houses.

Mitch began a steady, soft rendition of *Down by the Riverside* on some sort of long woodwind. The chanting ceased; the kids picked up the lyrics, “I ain’t goin’ study war no more, study war no more” The quickened tempo made Mitch adjust his music. Many of the adults added their voices to the next verse, “Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside”

They passed the charred black torso of the palm tree. Allen turned back to see the other cop car closely following the march. *Relax, guys, it’s all non-violent today.*

The CHANNEL 4 station wagon, a cameraman, and reporter waited for them at the next corner. The protesters belted out, “Gonna talk with the Prince of Peace, down by the”

“Your cue, Frank, you’re on.” Allen pointed ahead to the TV people.

“Real funny.” Frank turned to say something to two teachers, who took over the banner’s poles as they reached the corner. Frank grabbed Allen’s elbow. “Come on, this has to be black and white together.”

“What about Sharon?”

“She wants me to do it.”

The young cameraman came closer in his jeans and a T-shirt, filming the

marchers. A middle-aged blond reporter approached them in suit, shirt, tie, and clashing white tennis shoes that would be off camera. He looked right at Allen. “Who’s in charge?”

“That would be Mister Williamson here.”

The man turned to Frank. “Okay, we’ll edit later, so don’t worry when you make a mistake or something.” The reporter asked for Frank’s name and position, then began the interview.

As Frank listed the five grievances, the middle of the march slowed down to shout the “New funds” chant for the TV crew. Frank answered questions until the rear of the march caught up. “. . . and next month at the school board meeting expect a demonstration by concerned teachers, parents and others from all over the city. Thanks, we need to get back.”

The reporter started summing up his story for the camera as Allen and Frank jogged back to join the end of the line; the marchers there cheered for them. The bell rang over at the gym. “Shower bell,” a girl called out.

Frank and Allen moved up gradually, then stayed about ten feet behind the banner until the marchers ahead came around the last corner, singing, “I ain’t goin’ study war no more”

Approaching the front of the school, they sang louder. The special ed. bus idled down the street, a line of cars waiting behind to pick up kids. The march arrived at the steps, and Frank raised a fist to proclaim, “New funds for old schools!” The crowd shouted the refrain, waving the signs as the last bell rang.

Some puzzled-looking kids left the school and stopped at the top of the stairs. Schultz and Cecil were just inside the front doors. The principal came out, causing a lull in the racket until it was obvious that he wasn’t upset. Schultz called down that they needed a path through the middle of the crowd.

Frank kept chanting and made his way up the stairs in a Moses-like parting of mostly dark faces. “Make room here, please!” He came to the top step as more kids left the school. A few joined the demonstration, but most hurried away through the opening.

Frank raised his fist again. “Right on, Thurgood Marshall students!” The crowd cheered excitedly, then the noise slackened. Many of the kids looked around at each other—they had a decision to make about staying or leaving. With open hands, Frank quieted the last of the chanters. “Okay, we’re proud and appreciative that so many students joined us today.” He waited for more

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cheers and applause. “Now, if you have responsibilities of *any* kind after school, you need to go take care of them. Those who don’t, you’re welcome to join us as we go around one more time. Thanks again to those who need to leave. New funds for old schools!”

The chant echoed back to him from the adults and kids who stayed; those who had to leave passed on picket signs to their friends. Mitch started playing *We Shall Not be Moved*, and the remaining marchers sang as they assembled on the stairs.

Sandra and Charmane walked up to Allen with Melissa, who was fussing in her mother’s arms. The baby had cherubic cheeks and large pretty eyes, moist from crying.

“She’s beautiful, Sandra.” Allen patted the child’s head. Melissa shied away.

Sandra shouted over the noise. “She turned cranky, Mister Greene, so we gotta take her. But she’s gonna grow up doin’ this. I’ll be takin’ her to see Bobby like I did to Doctor King—then after that, an’ after that. She’ll remember some of this when she’s big.”

Allen smiled. “I’m sure she will.”

“Bye, Mister Greene,” the two girls said one after the other as they walked away from the marchers who stayed, about a hundred.

Monique told Allen and Sharon that she’d had enough sun. She sat on the steps, shading herself with the parasol. “I’ll wait here—see you in a few minutes.” The column had already started moving away. Allen and Sharon fell in with Frank at the end, half a block behind the large banner, now held by kids.

The demonstrators seemed to be in a mellower mood, some of them walking arm in arm and singing “We Shall Overcome” with Mitch’s music. They came to the first corner, no squad cars this time, and started up the side street. The procession began to spread out more than it did during the first time around.

The banner passed the black stump again, then around the second corner, followed a minute or two later by Allen, Frank, and Sharon at the end. The singing began to fade when the marchers saw commotion up ahead past the middle of the block, where several students at the front took off in a panic like the day of the tree fire. The adults and kids still up there didn’t seem to move. Allen turned to Frank. “What’s this about?”

“No idea.” He was already running off. Allen and a few of the other tail-

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enders jogged after him. They passed some perplexed kids, asking them futilely what was going on. Frank had stopped to talk to three tall girls, probably ninth-graders. They were bawling and rambling on at once, their feet standing on the edge of a fallen WE SHALL OVERCOME sign.

Frank yelled at one of the girls. "Who? Start again."

She made a horrible sob. "S-some lady, sh-she came out t-to the street, a-an' tol' those kids up there."

"Told them what?"

"R-Reverend King. They sh-shot him."

Staring at the girl, Frank froze in place. Crazy jumbled color images of JFK's assassination in Dallas crossed Allen's mind like film fluttering through a faulty projector. Vaguely, he heard some screams as the news spread back through the crowd.

Frank had put his hands on the girl's shoulders, making her look at him. "Listen to me, Donelle! Did the lady say if Doctor King is still alive?"

Turning away from Frank, her moist eyes glowered at Allen, then Sharon, who had just caught up with them. "We don't know." She sobbed again into the arms of her two friends.

"Damn it." Frank turned back. A few kids were running away while the rest stood in the street like most of the adults, stunned or crying. "Teachers and parents, please escort as many kids as you can back to the front of the school! Go straight across, the back gate's open." Frank turned to Sharon and Allen. "Let's go on up to the corner for stragglers."

Amidst the confusion, the three of them spent the next few minutes shooing along the kids who were still around and picking up some of the discarded signs. They came to a grizzled old man on his porch, sobbing in his beach chair. A radio next to him blasted unintelligible noise. Frank called to him. "Is Doctor King alive?"

The man blubbered through his tears. "It's bad, real bad." Frank turned and ran ahead. Wiping their eyes, Allen and Sharon herded the remaining few kids to the last corner and onto Harding Place. About twenty kids and

adults milled around aimlessly in front of the school; others ran in or out of the front door. A couple of cars waited in the bus area.

Monique was sitting on the stairs in her now ridiculous outfit, holding the small red umbrella against the sun. She had retrieved her purse and was watching a small crowd gathering across the street in the parking lot. Frank put his signs by the stairs, then went right to her.

Allen dropped off his signs as Monique turned and stood up, releasing her parasol to hug Frank. She let go of him as Allen and Sharon approached. "All we know is they took him to a Memphis hospital." A run of mascara slalomed down Monique's face. "Apparently he's still alive."

"That's all that matters now." Frank hurried inside.

From the second step, Monique embraced Sharon, mashing the feather on her hat. Still crying, Monique hugged Allen, who lingered in her comfort, holding off his tears as they let go of each other. "Did you hear how it happened?" he asked.

"They're not sure yet, maybe a sniper."

"Good God—again."

Sharon was wiping her eyes with a forearm, looking toward the small crowd of kids and adults in the parking lot. "What's going on over there?"

"The preachers are organizing a vigil, walking over to a church in a few minutes." Monique picked up her parasol and purse, making a long sniff. She turned to Allen. "I think I'll just go home and watch the news."

He sat on the steps. "Yeah, me too. See you tomorrow."

"If we have school." She gently touched his cheek, then walked glumly down to the street with Sharon, their arms locked together before they stopped to talk to a parent. In the lot, some of those in the growing crowd had found and lit candles. Allen stared at the tiny flames, barely visible in the sunshine. The enraged face of the girl not thirty minutes before came to mind, then someone tapped his shoulder. He turned around to Miss Dorsey, who held a box of long candles, her eyes swollen but undaunted. "Please join us, Mister Greene."

He stood, nodding dejectedly to her. "Thanks, Miss Dorsey." They started down the steps.

"Candle?"

"No thanks. I'll probably turn back at the church."

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“It’s quite a ways from here, but there will be some others walking back.” They joined the crowd, and he took some of the candles to help pass them out. When the procession began to move slowly from the parking lot, Allen looked around and saw Linda, walking with her arm around an older lady’s shoulders.

One large homemade WE SHALL OVERCOME sign led the new march—Marlon and another boy held it high. Frank had returned and was walking slowly with Ron Lee. In the middle of the procession, Allen found himself near a reticent Rick Godina, who had a transistor radio plugged into one ear, his face ashen and grave.

Mitch, now at the front, softly played “Amazing Grace” on a long flute. Block after quiet block, the marchers sang, including Allen, who knew some of the lyrics from a Judy Collins version. They finally arrived at a small white church with a trim lawn around it. Nobody walked in right away; the crowd turned inward, humming or singing the old hymn together.

Crying, Godina tried to clear his throat. “It’s over.”

Allen turned to him. “What did you say?”

“Excuse me, everyone.” Godina slightly startled Allen with the unexpected strength of his call. The marchers had quieted to face the vice-principal. Tears racing down his cheeks, this time he spoke just loud enough for all to hear. “Doctor King was pronounced dead at 7:05, Memphis time.” There was complete silence for a moment, followed by cries and moans.

Looking out at the silent street through his clouded vision, Allen started walking back alone. He came to a forgotten sprinkler on a waterlogged lawn, where most of the worms on the flooded sidewalk had been flattened by shoes or tires. The same image came back to him from a fifth-grade essay he wrote about L.A. rain and the wanton carnage of so many beneficial creatures. *You and Ronnie—they’re worms for God’s sake.*

Back at the nearly empty lot, he started to go in for his box but instead walked over and unlocked the Volvo. Driving through the still neighborhood, he turned on the radio and listened to reports of rioting in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Detroit, and Chicago. Allen took the Hollywood Freeway to Sunset, then he headed west for Zuma Beach, turning off the radio.

The shore was practically abandoned. He left his shoes and socks by a boulder, then walked off into an inch or two of water. As the wave receded, some sand crabs burrowed down below the surface, tickling his toes and leaving

bubbles behind—Ronnie’s beachcombing muse right at his feet. *My God, what’s he doing today?* Allen walked up to sit on dry sand, then let the ocean sounds lead him practically into a trance. He came out of it several minutes later, guilty for his reverie as the blood-red sun inched below the horizon.

Back home just before eight, he found a note from Trudy saying that she was watching the news at her friend Rose’s place. He fed Pedro, turned on the TV in the living room and sat on the couch. Walter Cronkite looked aside glumly to someone off camera, his drooping mouth and jowls haltingly but clearly announcing the assassination of the “apostle of non-violence” as if someone had yet to hear the grim news. Cronkite explained that King was in Memphis because of a riot at his march there a couple of weeks before. He had returned to show that non-violence would prevail. Memphis Police, Cronkite said, had found a high-powered hunting rifle one block from King’s hotel and were looking for a “well-dressed young white man.” *There it is—now the riots start here.*

Allen picked up a red pencil he’d left on the coffee table and rubbed the wood surface so hard with his thumb that his skin began to burn. His mind’s eye saw more old newsreel clips, this time of stunned black and white mourners lined up ten deep along the side of the road, watching JFK’s casket roll slowly by.

Louring at some hokey Tennessee politician on TV, Allen rubbed the wood again. He broke the pencil in two, stood up and fired the pieces at the floor. “Goddamn it to hell!” One small red missile ricocheted up and hit the screen. He slammed his closed fist on a nearby end table, knocking the telephone and a drinking glass onto the hardwood floor.

He stared at the results of his deed, unsure for a moment what had caused it. *Freaking mad man.* He made himself breathe deeply a few times before starting to sweep up the mess. As he scooped up the shards with a dustpan, a tear fell below onto a piece of glass.

After he sat down again, head in hands, he looked up at the report on TV, but it had no immediacy for him until minutes later when Cronkite was back on saying that the worst of the rioting was still in Washington, D.C. A different reporter talked about how the coming dawn could bring even more violence in the cities. They showed two little girls, cowering by a store’s broken window—a Pulitzer shot if it had been a photo.



Trudy came in before ten. They hugged and cried a little, then watched the reports together for a while before the phone rang. “Who’d be calling now?” Allen reached down to the floor to pick up the phone—its casing was cracked. He heard tavern or party noise on the other end. “Who’s this?”

“That’s how you answer my damn phone?”

“Not yours anymore. What do you want?” Allen turned to his sister. She had her eyes closed, shaking her head.

“To talk to Trudy.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“How the fuck do you know?”

“She just told me.”

“What are you two doing?”

“Not that it’s any of your damn business, but we’re watching the reports on Doctor King.”

“Yeah, you would be.”

“Your surfing bums are waiting for you, Rick.”

“An’ you two are all cozy there in your own little house—that ain’t natural.”

“You are so full of shit. Call here drunk again and we turn you in for violating the restraining order.”

“Fuck you, fat-ass.”

“Have a good life, prick.”

Rick slammed the phone. Allen held the receiver in the air, looking at it. He dropped it carelessly into the slot.

Trudy was sobbing a little. “Thank you, Allen.”

“Yeah, he’s not worth any tears.”

“I know.” She dried her eyes on the sleeve of her smock. “A few years ago, that wasn’t him at all.”

“If you say so.” He sighed. “There’s nothing new on TV about Doctor King. You need some rest.”

“Yes, you’re right.” She got up and hugged him, then limped off to bed.

Allen stayed up with the news until he couldn’t keep his eyes open. He didn’t sleep well and was up earlier than usual the next day. Eating some cereal, he turned the TV on low, since Trudy was still asleep.

It was a local station. “As in other Western cities, it is eerily quiet here, very little of the usual early morning activity in the streets. Only a few cases of sporadic violence were reported last night in South-Central Los Angeles.” A reporter asked a black preacher why Watts had remained mostly calm.

“. . . our community leaders are in agreement that violence is ultimately self-destructive. ‘Alive, you can fight—dead, you’re dead.’ One thing that *doesn’t* help is some of you people on TV scolding rioters in other cities.”

After switching to a national feed, a reporter said that the rioting back east was going strong—in Chicago, the mayor gave shoot-to-kill orders. Then they showed a photo of Doctor King’s desperate, shocked entourage on the motel balcony, pointing off to where the shot came from, the fallen martyr at their feet. There had been no substantial progress on catching the assassin by Tennessee law enforcement or Hoover’s FBI. *That bastard called him ‘Martin Lucifer King.’*

He dropped the spoon, splashing milk and cereal onto his lap. Allen walked to the kitchen, tossed the bowl into the sink with a loud clatter, then dried himself. He walked back to the couch, picked up the phone and dialed Monique’s number.

“Hello.” Her answer was low and hoarse.

“Hi, Monique. Sorry for calling so early. I needed to hear a friendly voice.”

“Of course, Allen. I’m glad to hear yours too.” She made a loud snuffle. “This whole thing is so hard to grasp. It isn’t even four years since—”

“Yeah, who the hell is next?”

“Maybe this is the end of a horrible cycle.”

Sure. “At least Doctor King got to hear LBJ’s announcement last week. Did you see that report from . . .” He ranted about the investigation, finishing with, “. . . goddamn crackpots hiding with guns in half the cellars in this country.”

Monique was silent for a moment. “Yes, but you sound almost violent yourself. If we do have school, it won’t work for you to be so angry.”

He sighed heavily.

“Allen?”

“I’m not going to listen to one damn crack from Nash or his asshole friends.”

“If you confront them, they’ll be delighted to get you in trouble and make this day all about you, not Doctor King.”

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He took another deep breath. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll calm down before I get there.”

“I know you will, *amour*.”

“What do you think we’ll see with the kids today?”

“I doubt we’ll have many at all. Hopefully, that’s true for the visitors too.”

“I think I’ll go in now. Somebody will open up for me.”

“Why so early? They still might cancel.”

“I didn’t even bring my teaching stuff. I just want to get there and get ready, stop stewing about it. Thanks for listening to all my crap.”

“Of course. If we open, I’ll be there, but late.”

“Okay, bye.” Allen selected the closest he had to mourning clothes, a navy-blue cotton shirt and black jeans, then went out to his car and drove down the block. It was getting warm, the portent of another hot, smoggy day. The sluggishness he knew so well in Puerto Rico descended upon his temples like a dark heavy curtain. He took some coffee, turned onto Los Feliz Boulevard and drove only a block before nearly blacking out.

He pulled into a parking area next to RAY’S, a bicycle shop. Allen shut off the engine, closed his eyes, and listened to the myriad sounds of the morning commute, but he wasn’t able to isolate them. Allen opened his eyes a couple of minutes later and drank the rest of the coffee. Fighting off his dejection, he drove away.

Although it was past daybreak, many cars in the very sparse traffic were burning their headlights as they did for JFK. He turned his lights on again and crossed the L.A. River to the on-ramp. He merged without difficulty into a long gap in the freeway’s funeral procession—it was like the old science-fiction movies that used a filter at three in the morning to make L.A. look dead quiet.

He maneuvered his car easily onto the Harbor Freeway, but there was a back-up forming ahead, probably from an accident. Allen came to a complete standstill near downtown L.A. and looked around at the other commuters. Those going in his direction were mostly white—it was a cosmopolitan mix on the other side. Many drivers looked tense or frightened, not mournful.

Allen turned on the radio to see if there were any school closures, but the announcer was leading up to a recording made after a service for Doctor King. A girl from Grant High told a Burbank minister to go home and talk to his own people, that he and other whites “weren’t wanted down here.”

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Here we come anyway. He inched along by a disabled city bus until the traffic began to move again. His melancholy finally began to retreat to the back of his head.

After Allen took his exit, there was a red light at the bottom of the ramp. He pulled up behind three cars, the last one a huge old copper-brown Chrysler. He secured his windows and doors—the rearview mirror of the car ahead reflected an image of white tips on a short Afro. The man adjusted his mirror until his somber middle-aged face was visible.

Allen sighed. *See my headlights, brother?*

The eyes of *I ain't your brother, white boy*, glared back at him.

The left arrow came on, and the first two cars made their turns, but the Chrysler glided up to the line, where his motor apparently stalled. Their eyes connected again; Allen read, *You're gonna be late, honky—what you gonna do about it?*

He shifted to neutral and released the clutch. *Nothing, nothing at all.* Then, behind him, a white guy in a pick-up blasted his horn. Allen turned back. “Stupid jerk.”

Ahead, the man in the Chrysler tried the motor; it caught, but he got out of his car. At least six-four and three hundred pounds, he held a crowbar and turned toward the Volvo.

His hand trembling on the gearshift, Allen double-checked his doors and slouched in the seat, but the huge man just walked by and approached the pick-up's burning headlights. With level baseball swings of his iron bar, he busted the truck's lights one at a time—the other driver wasn't in sight, likely on the floor.

The man nonchalantly walked by Allen again, got back in the Chrysler and intentionally waited for the end of a yellow light before he took off, leaving Allen, the pick-up, and a line of vehicles to wait through another red light.

He made a long exhale. *Okay, that counts as my incident for the day.*

After they finally made their turn, the guy in the pick-up floored his accelerator and passed right away as if he intended to carry out some sort of retaliation. Allen drove on; most stores were closed, and almost no one was on the street. Leaving the first arterial, he made the turn onto 103rd, where the deserted city blocks near the Watts Towers gave the dark steel pinnacles an air of mourning.

When he turned onto Harding Place at 6:45, there were four cars in the lot. Marv was at the booth, laughing heartily to someone on his phone. Irritated, Allen hoped to glide by.

Marv hung up, still chuckling. “Hey, Mister.”

“You're early, Marv,” Allen said, stopping.

“Principal called me in—believe you're the first teacher here. Got your lights on, real good idea.”

“You mean for Doctor King.”

Nodding, Marv sipped his coffee. “An' it might give you a little more protection goin' through the neighborhood. Sure did have mine on.”

“Yeah. I'll be in my car until somebody shows.”

“No outside key?”

“Not for rookies.”

“Remember your lights, Mister.”

As was now his habit, he pulled in far away from the booth but near the street, and left the radio on. Instead of non-stop news, they had commercials again. Even worse, a parrot was promoting an L.A. bank in a cartoon voice.

Allen turned the ignition all the way off and watched the school; it was completely still, not one kid or adult hanging around. If they did have classes, he would start with some normalcy—the journals, then let them read. *Hell, they can sleep if they want.*

A staff member finally drove into the lot in a small silver sports car—no lights. Van Burton parked near Marv, but they ignored each other. The P.E. teacher unfolded his tall muscular frame from the small cab, then race-walked to the street in sweats, holding a whistle and keys. He looked around warily, then jogged south past Main to unlock the back gate and enter the grounds. He locked up and was gone.

Godina's Chevy rolled in and parked near the driveway; its lights went off. The vice-principal got right out and walked away with his bulging briefcase, making a casual wave to Marv before hurrying into the crosswalk.

Allen got out to catch up with him. He hustled past Marv and was about to yell, but Godina was setting the doorstep for someone. Slowing down, Allen approached the far curb; he saw two big kids, maybe ninth-graders, sneaking around in the old cypress trees at the far end of Main, where Van Burton disappeared. He crossed over to the front steps, then turned again toward the end of the school. A boy stood up from behind a metal trash can and shouted to the other one. They ran off, looking back, then an explosive larger than a cherry bomb blew off, launching the garbage can a few feet into the air before it landed on its side with a clank, paper and plastic descending all around.

He walked up the steps and reached for the handle. The door was locked, the stop lifted. Peering through the thick glass, he saw Deniker walk away from the door, clipping a radio to his side. Allen grabbed the handle and rattled it. Looking bored, the guard came back to open up.

"Didn't you hear that outside?" Allen pointed south.

Besides the usual leather packs on his belt, Deniker had a new one shaped like a small covered holster. "M-80, maybe two."

"I didn't recognize the kids. They blew up a trash can and took off."

"Good." Deniker turned dismissively and walked away. Shaking his head, Allen entered the office, discomfited not to have his box with him to rest on the counter. Linda was alone, typing, her soft smile missing. Godina spoke on the phone in his office with the door closed.

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Linda's hair and her clothes, a dark-grey suit, were very neat as always, but her mascara was smudged. He spoke just loud enough to be heard. "Hi, are you alone out here today?"

She glanced up from her keyboard, her eyes slightly swollen. "Not sure—one of them called in." She did a slow double take, looking right at him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, not enough sleep I guess."

She nodded, dismally for her. The phone rang, and Linda picked it up, frowning but determined. "Thurgood Marshall Junior High." She waited. "Yes, we're going to start on time, then a short assembly before we close . . . you're welcome."

He spoke quietly again. "That answers most of my questions. I wonder if any kids will show."

"Not many, they're saying." She returned to work, her slender fingers a blur over the vibrating keys. The phone rang; she answered and began the same kind of interchange. Walking away, Allen furtively watched Linda's demeanor, consoled by her grim resolve. He was almost to the doorway when she hung up.

"Mister Greene, today's bulletin will be in your box soon. The gist is that there'll be an announcement before homeroom, then a bell to go to the auditorium for," she briefly closed her eyes and exhaled, "the program. Students will be dismissed from there." Head down and a tissue in hand, she didn't move for a moment, staring at her desk. "Uh, teachers have a short meeting afterwards—classrooms are to be locked, except to let in the students."

"Okay." He checked for anyone within earshot. "Linda."

Dabbing a tear, she looked up. "Yes?"

"Thanks for just being here today." He turned to go.

"Wait."

He faced her; she was already more composed.

"Allen, be careful the next few days."

"Yeah, thanks." He made a slight smile, then entered the hall. Cecil had replaced Deniker inside the front door.

The guard waved at him. "Mornin', I'll be near your duty area. Won't hardly be no kids—no need to come."

"Thanks, Cecil." He climbed the middle stairway to the third floor; the

dim hallway was empty. He walked down to his room and entered, keeping the door locked. He had forgotten to tell his sixth-period class the day before to realign the desks; the janitor had put them back in rows and would be pissed again. Everything else was about the same, except his box was moved from the floor to his desk, and the chalkboard had been needlessly washed again.

Allen sat, staring up at his bulletin board, where student papers were interspersed around a Xeroxed jacket of *The Pearl*, which he had read aloud ten minutes a day to the Creative Writing class, most of whom became entranced by the story. Deciding to start a new bulletin board, Allen walked toward the butcher paper he kept in a corner at the back of the room. He spotted a faded red blotch of blood on one of the heat registers. *Del's—Jesus*.

At the last window, he looked down into the coliseum; Cecil wasn't around yet and the cafeteria portals were still closed. Only one of the regular kids who always tried to be first in line was waiting there. Allen put the roll of white paper under his arm, went back up front and started to dismantle his old bulletin board.

By his usual duty time, he had finished stapling and trimming the paper. Allen looked out to see Cecil and a boy chatting near the kiva. A male loner cowered by himself near Main—a handful of students trudged around aimlessly.

After the bell rang, a quiet kid named Thomas came in first, sat right down in a far desk and rested his head on both arms. Darrel and three more boys walked in silently, then Marlon. He was in black again, but probably for Doctor King instead of his usual reason. He sat, frowning at peripatetic T.R., who entered in his faded Mister Magoo T-shirt, jabbering excitedly about a messed up trashcan he saw outside. Marlon told him flatly to shut up.

The other boys were glum, except Aaron, the only big kid so far. He wore his usual gold shirt and was gazing expectantly out of the window. Two more boys wore black shirts, both of them steady track-three kids, one who pretended to be dull, another who liked to brag about his smarts and had been beaten up after school.

T.R. sat near Aaron, who defended him weeks before during the homeroom changeover. The small boy rewound the rubber band on his ponytail, raised his fair brows and started beating his palms on a desk as if playing bongos.

No more boys arrived before the bell. The intercom buzzed to life—instead of a chorus leading the Pledge, it was just one girl. Allen's seven

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homeroom boys got to their feet, most of them leaning on a desk, mumbling some of the words.

The PA was quiet for a few seconds. The boys sat as the principal's familiar deep voice came on, even lower and slower than usual. "Morning. Doctor King would have appreciated that you showed up for school today. Nevertheless, out of respect for him, we will be closing early."

Schultz paused, as if waiting for some reaction. The only noise in Allen's room came from T.R., who shouted, "Yeah!" He made another bongo flurry on his desk.

"When the bell rings after a twenty-minute homeroom, move in an orderly fashion with your teacher to the auditorium for a remembrance of Doctor King. School will be dismissed right afterward—buildings and grounds will be locked ten minutes later. Please wait now for the bell—thank you." Other than the fidgeting T.R. and Aaron, who was looking out again, the rest had their heads down.

After the bell, Allen had to wake two of them. They all entered the quiet corridor, where Monique and Charmane, both all in black, plus about ten more girls began to move silently toward the north stairs, the boys several feet behind. Marlon walked close to Allen, his solemn face down, watching their footsteps.

They walked out below the arch, then into the oven-like coliseum to cross to the other side. Aaron had lagged behind, then he took off running back through the north arch. Before Allen could even shout, the boy was scaling the fence. T.R. laughed while Marlon seemed to enviously watch Aaron run down the street. "He'll end up in juvie tonight," Allen said to them. "Let's go, guys."

The boys stayed together, about twenty feet behind Monique's girls. Except for T.R.'s nervous babble, hardly a word was spoken as they crossed the coliseum's hot asphalt. Two other small groups were walking in front of Monique. They passed the cafeteria building and headed for the auditorium's main entrance. Darrel stooped to tie his shoe; Allen and the boys waited, falling even farther behind.

Up ahead, Ishimoto was standing in the propped-open doorway in a pastel-peach business suit, giving herself a quick check-up in a compact mirror. She put it away, forcing a smile for Monique, then saying something to the girls.

As the boys came to the door, the vice-principal's smile turned to a sneer.

“Last one here, Mister Greene.” She pointed inside and began to pre-scolld the boys while flashing her practiced grin. “. . . and fill in right behind Mrs. Morgan’s girls—*no* open chairs between homerooms. All right, go ahead now.” The boys moved slowly. “Well, go on.”

“They’re going already,” Allen said in a mutter, away from her.

Ishimoto’s eyes darted to him. “What was that, Mister Greene?”

“Keep going, guys.”

Marlon looked at Allen curiously as they walked into the auditorium. The lights were dimmed halfway for the program, but it was stifling inside, even with all the exits open in hopes of a cross-breeze. Sharon had joined Monique and her girls, seated in the last half-full row. The boys made sure it was Darrel who had to sit by the final girl, then they filled in behind him.

Instead of sitting near their students, some of the teachers convened in small groups by the open doors. Less than a fourth of the auditorium was occupied. After waiting in the aisle for his boys to settle, Allen sat down in the first of the walnut-stained seats. Marlon was nearest, three chairs away, but he got up and moved next to his teacher—the rest of the boys followed him, leaving three unoccupied chairs in the middle of the row.

To hell with Moto’s rules. Except for a spotlight on the closed curtain, the stage was dark. Allen turned back for a moment—a few parents and classified staff were making their way in past some teachers who were yapping in the foyer.

T.R. had found a girl to bother in the row ahead. The rest of the boys stared at the curtain as it began to part slowly but steadily, just as some kid on stage crew had been taught. A dozen or so members of an adult choir waited in two lines at mid-stage in glistening royal-blue robes. Mitch stood before them in a black shirt and slacks, his back to the audience.

Schultz walked slowly across stage to the microphone in the spotlight. He turned, shaded his eyes to gauge the readiness of his audience, and then lowered his head, almost like praying.

Accustomed to telling the student body two or three times to settle, Schultz looked up, his facial folds creased even more. The principal’s brows lifted in mild surprise when the few noisy kids hushed right up. His voice croaked as he began speaking slowly. “I, uh, wish there was something I could say that would somehow comfort you on this most difficult of days.” He paused,

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tearing up and barely holding it together. “All I can tell you is that my family, like yours, is deeply saddened by the tragic death of Martin Luther King.”

He sighed, looking down gravely again. The audience remained silent. Schultz gradually raised his head. “The majority of your classmates have chosen to stay home this morning. You will be joining them soon—no one is absent today. I want to thank all of you for coming in and honoring, with your behavior, the non-violent legacy of Doctor King.

“Mister Warner has invited some members of his church choir. They will perform two songs, and then you are dismissed from here. We will have a full assembly on Monday to honor Doctor King. Thank you.” Just a handful of kids, including T.R., applauded foolishly; Schultz turned to the choir. “Mister Warner.” The principal went down the side stairs to sit with those in the first row.

Mitch walked the five or six feet to the microphone, then spoke in a soft clear voice; his face looked numb. “The first hymn is known to be a favorite of Doctor King’s. Those who wish to sing with us are welcome to do so. After that, we’ll sing ‘We Shall Overcome,’ and then you may leave. Thank you.”

He backed up to the choir. The singing started, and the audience began to stand. The devout hymn wasn’t one of the standards Allen had heard before. With everybody now on their feet, a few of the nearby students sang softly while others began to sob.

When the choir finished, the auditorium was again completely silent, save for some snuffles, before a fire truck rumbled by the school, its klaxon and siren blaring. Allen tuned out the routine racket like everyone else did.

As the truck noise faded, the choir began the civil rights anthem, singing wistfully and slow, as if to remind the audience of the lyrics. His eyes swelling, Allen softly sang the lines he knew and looked over at T.R., who was drumming with two pencils on the back of his seat. Monique, Sharon and all the girls were singing.

On the second time through “We Shall Overcome,” more kids and adults were crying and their voices were louder, the cadence moving a bit faster. Most of the students in front began to move side to side, then Marlon took Allen’s elbow and the arm of the boy on his other side; their whole row began to sway.

“Deep in my heart, I do believe . . .” resounded even louder. T.R. fooled with his pencils, but the rest of the boys and Allen moved in unison. The choir

softened for a third and final round. When the music came to a close, Marlon released his teacher's arm.

Allen could barely see and had to wipe his face with a sleeve. He stole a moment to look gratefully at Marlon, then at Mitch and the choir before he stepped back to let his small group of mostly subdued boys file out slowly.

Monique and the girls went the other way, so Allen followed the boys and some other kids up the aisle. Back at the main doors, Ishimoto hadn't budged from her post and was repeating "Good job" as she grinned to the solemn students.

To keep from saying something to her he'd regret, Allen made a hard right turn and crossed through the last row of chairs, flipping up seats and banging his shins once. He turned left up the far aisle to leave through that exit, which was manned by Cecil, wearing a brown summer sport coat with a dark tie. The usually friendly guard seemed to look suspiciously at the few kids who walked by.

Allen stayed near the wall, trying to slip past, but Cecil avoided the kids and moved into his path. "Excuse me, Cecil."

The guard tugged Allen's sleeve. "Be ready for Monday." He paused to lower his whisper even more, then spoke faster than usual. "The you-know-what's gonna hit the fan when all the cryin's done." His glare turned to a faint grin. "We'll be ready, just got us a new *dee-vice*, an' is it ever somethin' . . ."

"Cecil, I need to get going."

"Oh. Yeah, everybody's hightailin' it outta here."

"See you." He walked out, then around the cafeteria and into the coliseum, where a few kids were dashing between buildings. Allen started up the quiet north stairway.

In the hall by his room, two boys were at the lockers. "We're goin', Mister Greene," they both said, then took off.

"See you, Monday." He entered the room; it was completely quiet before some static came up on the intercom.

"Attention, please. The special ed. bus is here." Linda paused, then continued in monotone. "Also, any teachers still in the classrooms are reminded to lock their doors—all exits and gates are now locked. The short meeting will be at ten-thirty in the cafeteria, then staff is dismissed."

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The PA crackled off. He went to the door to lock it, then returned to his desk. Leaning back in the wobbly swivel chair, he put his feet up and closed his eyes. *Okay, now you can breathe a second.*

Allen came out of his meditation minutes later when he heard someone trying his door. Not having seen Sandra since the demonstration, he was surprised to see her with Melissa through his portal.

Allen went out to the hall. Sandra's long black dress and the deep bags under her swollen eyes made her look much older. The baby slept soundly on her shoulder.

"Hi, Sandra. How are you doing?"

"Nobody's doin' good, Mister Greene."

"Yeah." He patted her once on the back.

"Am I disturbin' you?"

"No, just finished a little rest."

"You wanted to see me."

What? "Oh, right, I'm glad you remembered."

"I stayed home this morning, but this is real important to me too. My aunt's waiting in the car."

He craned his neck to see the hall clock. "Good, I have twenty minutes. Let's go." He locked his door, and they started down the quiet corridor. "I think we can work something out with Mrs. Berg's phone so you can check on Melissa from school."

"That'd be real good, Mister Greene."

"How did you get in here now?"

"Knocked on Mister Godina's window."

He grinned a little. "That's my trick."

They came to the middle stairway and started down. "Just remember, Sandra, you can't make calls unrelated to Melissa or you'd lose the privilege."

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"I know. I promise I won't do that."

"Good enough." They passed the second floor. "Can I ask you something? I think you're an expert on the subject."

Melissa fussed a little; Sandra patted her gently. "Ask what you want, Mister Greene, but how am I a expert?"

"On the kids. They respect you, and you understand them as much or more than anybody. I think you have, um, a kind of leadership that could help you a lot someday."

"How do you mean?" They stepped off the last stairs to the first floor—no one was around in any direction.

"Well, I think you could be a lawyer, a politician, or maybe a businesswoman—something like that."

"That means college. You see what's on my shoulder?"

"I'm not saying it would be easy, but you have a lot of determination."

Sandra turned pensive for several moments before they stopped outside the office. "What did you want to ask me about the kids, Mister Greene?"

"To be honest, I'm trying to get some idea of what to expect next week."

"Are you afraid of what might happen?"

"Sure. I'm not as tough as I sound." He sighed. "I'm also worried about all the kids who aren't looking for trouble, like you and Charmane."

"In some ways, Charmane's stronger than I am." Her dark-red lipstick and smudged black eyeliner arched with a frown. "So many kids are mean to her, makin' fun of her birthmark an' callin' her worse things than *gimp* if I'm not around."

"I wish I could do more about that—not sure what."

"Charmane handles them pretty good. Don't do anything in front of the kids, Mister Greene—that'd make it worse."

"Okay, I'll remember that."

"She had a muscle disease when she was little—they can't ever fix the limp. They could take off that birthmark when she's older, but Charmane says it's part of her."

"She seems to make the best of all of it."

"That's right. She showed me how to be proud of who you are and not be a fool like some of these kids."

"You two have found quite a friendship."

"Best friend I ever had." Sandra stared past him. "You an' me are the same

in one way, Mister Greene—everyone thinks I ain't afraid of nothin'. That's how I get by, but it's different now—sometimes I'm real scared." Sandra faced him, her eyes moistening. "If somethin' happens to me, Melissa's got nobody but my aunt." She hugged the baby without waking her.

"Things aren't getting better with your mom?"

She closed her eyes briefly, pursing her lips. "No."

"Sorry, none of my business."

"It's okay." She sighed and turned to him. "About next week, Mister Greene—all this with Doctor King is worse than anything before. I heard a lotta talk about trouble—it's mostly boys the school knows about an' some from Grant. Don't know when, but there's gonna be some bad days here. My aunt said the funeral's Tuesday—nobody'll come to school, hardly any on Monday either."

"Sandra, without using your name, I'd like to pass on what you said to Mister Schultz."

"All right."

"Thanks. Are you coming on Monday?"

"If they have school. I can't miss no more."

"Okay, let's see if Mrs. Berg is available."

They approached the office door. "Mister Greene?"

"Yes?"

"You're doin' okay here."

Allen stifled a scoff. "Well, thanks—you are too."

Melissa woke up in the office; Sharon gave Sandra a hug, held the baby, then listened to Allen explain the problem. She said she would arrange things on Monday with Mrs. Eichler. After Sandra said thanks, Allen went outside with her and the baby, then watched them walk all the way to her aunt's car.

He climbed the middle stairs against a flow of teachers, then walked into Monique's open room. She was at a window, staring out front before she turned to him. "Hi, Allen. Well, we made it through that day easily enough."

"Yeah, but I'm scolding you for not locking your door."

"Hard to break old habits." She leaned on the counter.

"We have a meeting."

"Oh, that's right."

After she locked up, they went down the hall to the north stairs, well

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behind another teacher. Allen and Monique descended slowly; a middle-aged math teacher met them at the second-floor landing. Monique chatted with her as they all walked down, then into the coliseum.

The heat radiated off of the brick and asphalt. There were no kids around, just a dozen or so teachers walking quickly ahead in small groups. Most of them passed close to Cecil, who was talking on his radio near the south archway. The math teacher went off to join someone else.

Allen turned to Monique, who shaded her face with a hand. "Are you surprised there hasn't been more trouble so far?"

"Let's just take it as testament to a brilliant and gentle man." She flinched slightly at a cherry bomb exploding somewhere near the auditorium. Cecil ran off in that direction.

"Geez, right on cue." He reached for the cafeteria door. A few feet inside, York and Jorgenson walked ahead of them in stifling heavy black dresses. Several tables were set up near the kitchen, where most of the faculty had arrived, some of them prattling away as if it were an ordinary day. Maybe half of them were wearing dark clothing.

Jorgenson and York headed for a table to sit with Latham, who was in a dark skirt and white top. Allen followed Monique there, and they settled between Latham and Dorsey, who held her charcoal suit coat as she spoke quietly with Mitch at the end of the table.

Monique chatted with Mrs. York while Dorsey, a black armband on her blouse, stopped her conversation to face Allen. "Hello, Mister Greene."

He tried not to sound unnecessarily cheerful. "Hi, Miss Dorsey. Great job today, Mitch."

They both nodded back, then went on talking. More teachers filed in from the stairs and doors. On the side facing the auditorium, a janitor was sweeping glass by a far window, likely shattered by bullets that passed through the grating. A closer pane was already covered with plywood.

Mrs. Ishimoto, a black armband now on her light-orange sleeve, stood up front by the serving line, unrolling a large paper shopping bag. Frank was at a table by himself; Allen got up, telling Monique he'd be right back. Frank was glaring out at the coliseum, his thick arms folded, an armband on the sleeve of his denim shirt.

"How are you doing, Frank?"

"I'm here." He handed over Ronnie's envelope. "Sorry, I read this one."

"I don't think he'd mind."

"You're right about him, he has a gift."

Allen sat on the edge of the table, opened the envelope and read Ronnie's printed poem:

The sparrow gathers twigs—it doesn't know.
The swallowtail flutters to plants—it doesn't know.
The yellowjacket dabs the mud—it doesn't know.
The bumblebee sips nectar—it doesn't know.
The mawking bird mawks us all—it seems to know—
What we do to each other.

He closed his eyes briefly, taking a deep breath.

Frank was watching him. "Serious enough for you?"

"Yeah, and I was going to ask him to try to write about Doctor King. Thanks, I'll get it back to you on Monday."

Frank stared at the coliseum again, then Allen walked over to Monique and sat down. She spoke to him, sotto voce. "Gird yourself, here he comes."

Nash was approaching in a light-brown summer suit; Allen turned away to the other teachers. Ishimoto waited up front, filing her nails with an emery board.

"Well, Mrs. Morgan and Mister Greene, good morning." After his brash exuberance, Nash sat across from them, his chain rolling noisily along the table's glossy Formica surface.

"Mister Nash." Allen didn't look at him.

"Morning, Simon." Monique stood. "Excuse me, I have to see Mrs. Berg for a second. You two be civil while I'm gone."

Allen turned from Nash, opened the envelope and started to read the poem again.

"So, Mister Greene, I assume you would agree that it is much too perilous to have school on Monday."

Allen didn't respond.

"Well?"

"Perilous for who?"

"Whom, Mister Greene."

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Allen finally faced him. "What did you say?"

"Perilous for *whom*."

"Oh, right. So, for *whom* is it going to be perilous?"

"You are well aware that any of us could be in danger at a time like this."

"The kids who show up might be in danger—we've got cops and security guards."

"Good glory—we *got* cops? Do you really consider yourself to be an English teacher?"

"No, I was drafted. Anyway, I said, *we've*—look it up." Trying to tune out Nash's answer, he saw Schultz entering, now with an armband on his white sleeve.

". . . not acceptable in formal Standard English, which is what *you* are supposed to be modeling. Our students are shallow enough as it is."

Screw it. "Jesus, if that's what you think, why do you even bother to teach them?"

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain to *me*," Nash said, pointing a finger. "And you dare to question *my* motives?" He lowered his arm and his voice. "It is the permissiveness by you and your kind that is the scourge of our educational system. Fortunately, even *this* school won't require your services in the fall. I assume they have already made that clear."

"None of your damn business, but you're right about the danger—unless somebody happens to have a scary briefcase."

Nash's face contorted, then he jeered at Allen with a hiss-like noise. "What in creation do you *think* you're talking about?"

"You know, Mister *Snash*."

"How dare you call me that? I will have you reprimanded for your impudence and unprofessional—"

"Schultz is here, knock yourself out." Monique was heading back to them.

"No, I will be talking to our new principal. You have not heard the last of this." Nash picked up his briefcase and walked toward Ishimoto, who was busy with Schultz, passing out papers selectively to some teachers.

Monique sat down. "All right, what did you say to him?"

"Snash is very touchy about his nickname."

"*Snash*?" She suppressed a chuckle. "That's a new one."

The cafeteria intercom crackled loudly, then Godina came on. "Mister Schultz?"

The principal called back from a far table. "Yes?"

"Mister Schultz?"

"Yes, I hear you!"

"This damn thing never works right." Godina's aside caused some chuckles from the teachers. "What?" Dead air followed his question. "Please excuse that slip," he said to more giggles. "Mister Schultz, my radio is out, and we have a situation. If the guards aren't there, I was about to make an all-call."

"They aren't here. Do you need me?"

"Oh, there's Mister Walls. We'll be okay."

While most of the audience speculated to each other about what was going on, Ishimoto gave a handout to Latham and Allen; he quickly read the procedures for emergency closure.

Schultz and Ishimoto came back to the serving line. The principal, wan and hollow-eyed, cleared his throat. Everyone was immediately quiet this time. "Thank you, this won't take long." Ishimoto sat near the grocery bag showing her half-grin—it transformed to a scowl for a straggler who walked in.

"My thanks to Mister Warner for putting together today's assembly at the last minute—it was inspirational for us all. I also want to thank him again, plus Mrs. Ishimoto, Mister Jackson, and Mrs. York for already starting to organize our students and the community for Monday's full program to honor Doctor King. I'm sure it will be equally inspiring." He paused and exhaled.

"Also, I want to inform you that we will gradually be transitioning next week to Mrs. Ishimoto being in charge. She will take over full-time a week from Monday, although I will be around." Schultz waited for some pleased chatter and light applause before nodding to the vice-principal. "Also, for those who want one, you can pick up a black armband from Mrs. Ishimoto after we finish here in a few minutes."

After another contented murmur passed through the faculty, Schultz's face tightened. "As for what else to expect next week, we don't exactly know, of course, but word is spreading about possible trouble here. We expect lower than normal attendance on Monday, then very low on Tuesday, the day of the funeral." He paused when Deniker entered from the narrow hallway by the kitchen.

"The current plan is that Monday will be a half-day, mainly for the assembly, and Tuesday will be another half-day so students can get home

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in time to watch the funeral. We also expect to get clearance for staff to be dismissed at noon on both days.” A few teachers, including Latham, made an audible gleeful response to that announcement. Schultz excused himself to speak quickly with Deniker.

Following her interjection, Latham had turned timidly to Miss Dorsey. “Oh, I didn’t mean any disrespect. It’s just that the extra time gives me a chance to finish shopping for my parents’ silver anniversary.”

Dorsey’s face turned severe. “Miss Latham, why are you apologizing to me?”

“I thought you were mad when you looked my way.”

“No, I think most of us looked at you. I have no reason to be angry with you, Miss Latham. Rest assured that I would express myself clearly if I did.”

“Oh.” Latham attempted to smile. “Okay.”

Schultz finished with Deniker. “All right, where was I?” He checked his notes. “Okay, we are hoping that Wednesday will be a somewhat normal day.” He pointed to the nearby plywood. “That incident is from last night.” He nodded to the janitor and his broom. “And that happened during the assembly this morning.”

Over some low grumbling, Schultz said the highest priority would be to assure the safety of the students and staff. He explained other security steps that had already been taken. Nash, now sitting with Anders, got to his feet. Schultz faced him. “Make it very brief, Mister Nash.”

“I believe that the measures you have described, Mister Schultz, are inadequate to protect the staff and students. The only sensible recourse is to close school for both of those days and to have the assembly on Wednesday.” Nash’s comment was met with strong applause. He sat, smirking.

Schultz waited. “That’s not going to happen. We will start school each day, then reassess the situation. If it turns out attendance is very low along with major disruptions, we will consider closing before noon. You new teachers and subs just received a copy of the procedures for emergency shutdown, in case it is necessary. Please read it, if you haven’t already.”

Nash stood again, clearing his throat pompously. “I must remind teachers that emergency duty, by contract, is voluntary, and your only requirement is to inform an administrator if you won’t be there. Considering the situation next week, I advise all of you to do just that. Perhaps it will result in more security provided to the school by the authorities.”

"It will result in *less* security for the kids." Frank got to his feet, facing the audience. "If we do have emergency closure, it's no skin off our noses to stand out there for ten minutes to be sure students get off okay."

Nash spoke smugly from his seat. "And if there are hoodlums, what will you do Mister Williamson, save the day by stopping them with your bare hands?" Some teachers chortled.

Frank's face contorted into a slow burn. "I'll tell you what *you* can do, Nash—"

"All right, enough." Schultz sighed. "First of all, Mister Williamson probably *would* physically defend a student if he had to, and I don't see any humor in that. However, we don't expect teachers to do anything of the kind—we ask you to be there as a deterrent and to report any suspicious activity. I need to know how many of you are willing to show up in case we do ask for emergency duty."

Monique and Allen raised a hand; he looked around and saw that those he expected had volunteered and about half of the rest were also holding up an arm.

Schultz finished a quick count. "That will help a lot—thank you. As Mister Nash said, we need to know the emergency areas that won't be covered. Please inform the secretaries—the list will be discarded later. Any questions?"

Scowling at Schultz, Nash kept his mouth shut this time.

"All right then, if you must stay in your room this afternoon, be sure it's locked. That's it. Oh, and the armbands, if you would like one." Before Schultz finished his sentence, most of the teachers were on their feet, including Nash, crowding toward the vice-principal. Some teachers grabbed at the bag like early arrivals at a Christmas sale. Ishimoto dumped them all out and moved aside from the frenzy.

Monique tugged Allen's sleeve. "Would you get me one?"

"Okay, be right back." He got up to join the crowd.

Frank was on his feet, watching the teachers. "Plenty of armbands, Allen."

He walked closer to him. "Did you bring them?"

"No, Dorsey." Frank nodded toward the pile. "It's downright heartwarming that Moto and Nash care so much."

"Yeah. Well, I gotta get a couple too." He sighed and walked away from Frank toward the frantic teachers.

A few minutes later, Allen and Monique crossed the coliseum, armbands

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in place. Many of the teachers again scurried along near Cecil, who was talking to the only two students in sight. Allen held the door for Monique and another teacher; they entered Main and were startled for a moment by an explosion that wobbled the doors—it seemed to have come from below, near the boiler room.

On the stairs, they heard someone clamor behind them into the building and scuttle down to the basement. They climbed to the second floor landing. “If we do end up closing early, where’s your emergency duty, Monique?”

“I’m in that little hall by the kitchen that goes to the nurse and guards—that’s why I so bravely volunteered.”

“If it does happen, I could walk you back after we dismiss out front—we’d be going the same direction.”

“Yes, thank you. Allen, if it gets crazy in the coliseum, don’t deal with it by yourself.”

“No, I won’t.” They came to the top of the steps and started down the hall. She faced him. “I apologize for leaving you with Simon.”

“It’s okay. As much as I hate to agree with him, why *are* we having school on Monday and Tuesday?”

“Policy. A half day counts as a whole for funding. Unless the district closes the school, the principal has to show he has sufficient reason. Simon, of course, knows that—anything to get the teachers behind him.”

“I was surprised Schultz had so many volunteers.”

“Yes, some just need a little push.” She jangled her keys. “Simon was beet red when he walked away from you. Did you say something besides the nickname?”

“I made fun of his briefcase.”

“Oh my.”

“He’s going to report me to Ishimoto.”

“He doesn’t have grounds for anything, but he won’t stop goading you.”

“I’ll keep avoiding him, but if he comes looking for trouble, he’s going to find it.”

Allen spent much of the weekend in front of the TV with Trudy, watching the famous and the ordinary reacting to the murder of Martin Luther King. There was no progress in finding the assassin, the rioting continued back east, and the National Guard was called out in several cities. More than twenty people were already dead.

Reading student papers on and off, he stayed up with the news on Friday and Saturday night until the early morning, and then didn't sleep in very long. Sunday was declared a National Day of Mourning by LBJ. Some national black leaders said his pleas for peace in the cities were hypocritical. Black clergy and other spokesmen in L.A. called for non-violence; the city remained relatively quiet.

After Trudy left for a while on Sunday, Allen watched film of two speeches he would never forget. In Memphis, the night before the assassination, Doctor King essentially predicted his own demise in a sermon. The other speech was by Bobby Kennedy, halting a campaign rally to tell an unsuspecting crowd the shocking news about Doctor King. A close-up of four grief-stricken but somehow hopeful kids in Bobby's audience reminded Allen of Sandra, Ronnie, Charmane, and Marlon.

Watching the news alone until after two a.m., Allen slept through the alarm Monday morning. Probably late to Marshall for the first time, he let Monique know with a quick call, then got himself together, putting on his rumpled clothes from Friday—the navy shirt, armband, and black jeans.

Traffic was very light again. He turned onto Harding Place at 7:30, fifteen

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minutes before duty. Allen's frantic trip had kept his dejection at bay, but he parked in the first open spot and took a minute to finish off his coffee before he got out. It was already very warm, so he tossed his jacket into the Volvo, and then walked quickly from the lot, making a passing wave to Marv.

He hurried across the street but slowed down for several students who were huddled on the front steps listening disconsolately to the news on a transistor radio. Two of his boys from homeroom said, "Mister Greene." Some kids had red eyes from crying or lack of sleep.

Inside, Deniker was standing there, his face not quite as dour as usual. "Ishimoto wants you." He almost smiled.

"I'll be late for duty."

"We'll live."

Linda wasn't in the office, and he didn't see either of the vice-principals. He could hear Schultz on the phone, his door open and the curtain closed. Venable, in a dark-grey shift, was waiting on hold with the phone by her ear.

"Morning, Mrs. Venable. Miss Watson didn't make it in?"

"She's delayed. Mister Schultz wants to see you."

"Now?"

"If it's convenient."

The snideness of her remark barely registered. "What about Mrs. Ishimoto?"

"What about her?"

"Never mind. He's on the phone—I'll just get my mail."

Checking the bulletin on the way back, Allen read that the schedule was the same as Friday's. He approached Schultz's door; the principal called him in, but Venable came over and walked in first. Ron Lee and Frank were sitting by Schultz's desk, armbands on their sleeves, going over some lists. They nodded to him and went back to work.

Venable stood before her boss. "LAPD just called. They'll have one squad car here for the next few days, another one at Grant." She turned to leave.

"Starting at what time?" Without his suit coat, Schultz looked even lankier than before.

"They're not sure—by eight, they hope." She backed up to the door.

Schultz got up, sighed, and opened his curtain. "Tell them we need at least two cars, or use my name and I'll talk to them." He returned to his desk. "Mister Greene, we need your help for a minute. Sit down if you like."

"I'm okay." He took another step forward from the door as Frank and Ron concentrated on their lists.

"Like that student told you, we have more reports of high-school boys bragging about making trouble here, but still no idea when—damn it all." Schultz glanced self-consciously at the outer office, then pointed at Frank and Ron. "Anyway, we're concentrating on *our* kids, and we've already checked off the regular troublemakers. Now we're identifying marginal ones, especially if they've been in this black and gold business. We'll gather those who show up, talk to them, and hopefully convince some not to get involved in anything destructive."

"Who's going to talk to them?"

"Frank, Ron, Mrs. Berg, and Mister Fogle."

"Not to rock the boat," he lowered his voice, "but I doubt that many boys will listen to what Fogle has to say."

Frank turned from his work. "Like we said, boss."

Venable signaled to Schultz from her desk; he put a hand on his phone, sighing toward Allen. "Okay, I'll think about that. Anyway, some of the seventh-graders are already checked off on this list—please take a minute with it." He handed over the paper and took his call.

Putting his box on a chair, Allen used it as a writing surface. There were already about thirty seventh-graders singled out, mostly boys. He marked only three more, two boys and a girl. He jotted down the names of his homeroom boys who had already been checked—eight of them, but five were suspended or expelled. Frank and Mitch kept working as Allen gave them the list and started to leave.

Schultz covered the receiver with his hand. "Thank you, Mister Greene."

"I only added three, and I don't agree with some who are on there, like Marlon Brown."

"That's okay, see you at the assembly."

Allen left his box by Linda's desk, then went outside and heard a fire-cracker blow off somewhere near the gym. Only a few kids sat under the eucalyptus, and the lines at the cafeteria were not even half as long as normal. Another group of students surrounded the kiva, talking quietly and eating. Instead of the typical two or three loners, there were about ten, standing by a wall or wandering slowly in the coliseum, downcast, but Allen didn't know

any of them. They avoided the kids in line, who, as always, were mostly self-segregated by age, the older ones on the first iron rail, and mostly seventh-graders using the third. Many of the girls were in their Sunday best, and a few students wore black armbands.

There was very little of the usual banter or messing around. Deniker walked through the lines of dispirited kids, glaring at them. Allen made himself take a deep breath, then took the bulletin from his shirt pocket and skimmed the rest of it for pertinent information. It was mostly daily trivia, nothing about Doctor King or the student interventions, just a command that everyone was to have a “great day.” It had Moto written all over it.

As soon as Deniker left on his rounds, a small boy started goofing around with a very thin, tall girl from Allen’s period-six class. They were ducking under the iron rails to avoid one another, one moment laughing and shrieking, then making exaggerated threats to each other from a few feet away.

They were mostly ignored by the others, but a big girl who could pass for an adult berated the two seventh-graders when they crossed over into her territory in the first line. Oblivious, the two younger kids went right on playing around. It was the kind of silliness he wouldn’t have paid much attention to on any other day, but after the older girl warned them loudly again, Allen walked toward the commotion.

Approaching the backs of about fifty kids, he turned toward the first line, then had to circle around the rails before starting through the growing crowd. Ahead, the big girl held the twosome by their collars as if restraining two squirming cats. Some of the onlookers jeered, daring her to hurt them. Before Allen came very close, the girl shouted at her captives, “You can’t be grab-assin’ around here on a day like this!”

Amen. This probably wasn’t going to be a volatile situation, so he tried to steady himself.

When the girl saw Allen, she pulled the two young kids closer—they were crying a little. “You gonna show some respect an’ stop it?” They mumbled something, then she released them. After walking away slowly and wiping their faces, the boy and girl squealed again and took off after each other.

Some of the kids berated the husky girl for not beating them up, but she pointed back at her detractors in a way that reminded Allen of Sandra. “Ya’ll are jus’ like them, ignorant.”

He got between the girl and the crowd. "All right, everybody get in line or move on." Several kids, mostly boys, booed or catcalled as they left.

She faced Allen. "Teacher, I didn't hurt those little babies."

"Yeah, I saw that. Your name, please?"

"Maxine Reynolds. I suppose I'm in trouble."

"No, Maxine, just promise me you won't be grabbing anyone else."

"I told 'em three times—the last time I got mad." She tightened her lips in a pout. "Yeah, I promise."

"She hardly ever gets mad like that," a nearby girl said.

Yeah, me either. He nodded. "Okay, let's all just get on with what we were doing." Allen walked away from the lines. During his last minutes of duty, the faces of the kids in the mob who had called for blood kept coming back to him.

He hurried upstairs after the warning bell. In a black skirt and blouse, Monique was just about to open her door. "You look exhausted, Allen."

"So do most of the kids, but we have a lot more here today."

"Yes, more than I expected."

"I just broke up a squabble. Do you know an older girl named Maxine Reynolds?"

"Yes, a real good kid. She was fighting?"

"No, not really." Allen explained Maxine's indignation.

"Out of the mouths of babes."

"Yeah. Shakespeare?"

"Matthew, I believe."

"Some of the kids in that crowd really wanted blood."

She frowned. "Bad sign." The passing bell rang; some students were already clomping up the stairs. "Okay, see you out here in a little while."

"Right." As soon as Allen walked into the room, his middle window perfectly framed the year's second popcorn-stand fire. The new hut was half involved in flame, the cook standing uselessly nearby again with a small extinguisher. Deniker was there, spraying the blaze, then Cecil came running from the cafeteria. Sirens blared in the distance, and Venable made a bossy call on the intercom for the custodians.

About a dozen kids below stood by the kiva, staring at the fire until Cecil shoed them away. The smoke appeared to be more black and acrid than the

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last time. Allen stretched his neck out of the window. A dark haze had already drifted far above the school in the warm stagnant air.

Darrel walked in. Instead of coming over to the window, he squeezed his short rotund body into his usual front seat. He turned to his teacher.

“Hi, Darrel.”

“Hi, Mister Greene.” He arched his brows in bewilderment. “Can I come over there?”

“Sure.”

Darrel stood, walked across, looked out and said, “Again?” Two more boys entered, then came right over to watch. The Davis twins, at times as squirrely as T.R., ran in, both of them out of breath and excited as they joined the others at the windows.

“Cool,” Darrel said, admiring a ladder truck parked outside of the south arch. A red pick-up with panels drove right into the coliseum. As before, the firemen didn’t mess with hoses—they quickly opened the side panels and lifted out extinguishers. Moving over to the open space between the booth and the cafeteria, they aimed toward the base of the flames and quickly reduced the fire to embers.

A boy drifted into the room like a sleepy cat and sat in front with his head down. Marlon and a few more entered just before the tardy bell. They walked over to look outside. The tallest of them, Sam, was a minion of the gold faction and on the list to go to the counselor’s office. Allen went back to his desk to check off names—two more came in late.

Darrel gushed about being a fireman; the others paid no attention. Static began on the intercom, and Darrel turned to the front. “Mister Greene, can we watch this and listen from here?”

Allen nodded, then Venable came on again. “Your attention. Announcements will be delayed a few minutes.”

He joined the boys at the windows—residual smoke clouded whatever was left of the booth. The PA crackled again. “Mister Greene?”

“You made it, Miss Watson.”

“Yes, I’m doing a quick survey for Mister Schultz. How many in your homeroom, please?”

“Twelve. Is that about what the others have so far?”

“Pretty close. Also, Mister Fogle or Mister Van Burton will be by to pick up some of your homeroom boys—”

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"I have my list, only two of them are here."

"Okay, someone will be there soon." She was gone.

"Marlon and Sam, I need to talk to you."

Sam turned from the window. Marlon, at his desk with his head down, sat up. "Why me? I didn't do nothin'."

"Easy, Marlon, it's not anything to—" Someone dashed across the back of the room. It was Sam, running out the far door. Allen reached up to hit the intercom button, then turned to Marlon, motioning for him to come over.

Marlon dawdled but walked to the teacher's desk in a faded Dodger's T-shirt and blue jeans. Linda answered the PA. Allen reported Sam, then he and Marlon went out to the hall.

"Okay, don't take this wrong, you're not in any trouble." Allen explained why Marlon had to go down to the office.

"I ain't runnin' with nobody now, Mister Greene."

Allen saw Fogle coming down the hall with a small group of boys, all but one taller than him. "I know, Marlon, but—"

"I won't talk to nobody but Mister Williamson."

The nearly bald counselor, apparently relegated to delivery boy, was in a white dress shirt and dark slacks. He stopped at Monique's door and knocked.

Fogle glared at Allen, who was whispering with Marlon. ". . . Mister Williamson will be there, just ask for him. We'll save you a seat at the assembly."

"I bet they keep me."

Monique came out and released one of her homeroom girls. Allen turned to Fogle. "Sam ran off. Marlon's the only one on the list who's here."

The counselor just snarled at the kids. "Let's go." After watching Marlon walk away with them, Allen went back into the room and over to the windows. Half of his boys were still looking out, the rest sitting lethargically at their desks.

Like a charred marshmallow, the bottom third of the white popcorn stand had not been consumed by the flames. The firemen were already packing up the extinguishers. Two cops stood near their squad car, chatting with Cecil and a cook—not a kid in sight. Allen started for his desk, but Darrel yanked his sleeve. "Look, Mister Greene, they're not in school."

Allen turned in time to see five or six junior-high boys and girls, laughing away as they ran around the far corner of the cafeteria past the picnic benches. The cops jumped into their black-and-white and went after them.

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The intercom buzzed and Venable came on. “Your attention, the assembly is delayed. Remain in your homeroom and wait for the bell.”

When Allen, Monique and their kids finally entered the auditorium twenty minutes later, about half of the student body was there along with scores of parents. Schultz started the program, then turned it over to Ishimoto. Local dignitaries made long-winded speeches interspersed with off-key musical solos by students, Mitch trying to rescue them on the piano. Then some heavily clichéd essays by Mrs. York’s track-three seventh-graders made Allen judge that his so-called low students would soon be writing more germane and heart-felt responses to the tragedy. The very long assembly was topped off by Mister Jackson’s rambling, passionless biography of Doctor King.

Before she dismissed the students, Ishimoto told the teachers to help clear the grounds. Apparently not realizing that most of the kids were bored or half-asleep, she looked almost disappointed by their orderly egress. Allen and Frank ended up walking together across the coliseum well behind the last of the kids.

“How much of that did you get to see, Frank?”

“About half, thank God. Promised my wife I wouldn’t get too pissed today—I nearly lost it when Jackson said Doctor King won the *noble* Peace Prize.”

Allen chuckled without smiling. “Jackson wasn’t even the worst of it.” He watched a man in a suit kick at the popcorn stand’s rubble. “How did it go with the interventions?”

“Didn’t take long, not many were there. A few listened.”

A janitor rolled a wheelbarrow full of black debris past them. “Except for the fire, it hasn’t been so bad. I wonder if it will stay like this all week.”

Frank sighed. “It’s going to blow eventually, but not tomorrow.”

“What about the rest of South-Central?”

“The mood is mostly dejection so far, but everything’s changed by the assassination.”



Allen worked in his room a few more hours, wary for a visit from Ishimoto or a call from her on the intercom, but neither happened. He spent that evening with Trudy, watching the news.

As predicted, less than a hundred students showed up on Tuesday, the school and the grounds eerily tranquil. Schultz and Ishimoto were gone to a meeting, so Frank arranged with Godina to have two televisions set up in the cafeteria. Ron, Allen, Frank and a few more teachers supervised the students, many of whom had their heads down, watching or listening to the lead-up to Doctor King's funeral. Godina dismissed them from the cafeteria after period four.

At home that afternoon, Allen sat on the couch, sipping on a can of beer and watching the news. Pedro was asleep and Trudy was gone to a doctor's appointment. One of the L.A. channels was on with a man-in-the-street report, interviewing a middle-aged tourist couple from Phoenix. They stood over the sidewalk stars on Hollywood Boulevard, whining about the postponement of the Academy Awards for King's funeral.

Allen got up, glaring at the TV. "Shut the hell up." He changed the channel to CBS, settled on the sofa again, and took a swig of beer. Reverend Ralph Abernathy was already beginning to conduct the service for Doctor King. The church was full, and at least fifty thousand people were outside, listening to loudspeakers. They said the ceremony would likely be the largest funeral for a private citizen in U.S. history.

A hymn began, another one Allen hadn't heard before. The camera zoomed into the veiled Coretta King and one of their daughters, the child's eyes glazed and traumatized. The camera then panned over the celebrities in the audience, holding for a moment on Harry Belafonte, then dwelling on the Kennedy clan, especially Jackie and Bobby.

His stomach growling, Allen went to the kitchen to make a sandwich. He could hear Cronkite say that Hubert Humphrey was standing in for L.B.J. because they were worried about protesters. "In that church? Bull, even Nixon's there," he said, then came back with his food and another beer.

They started a recording of Doctor King eulogizing himself in a sermon. Moved to tears, Allen dropped his sandwich on the plate. He cried for a few minutes, then Trudy came home, and together they stared for hours at the rites on TV, followed by the procession rolling through the streets of Atlanta.

On Wednesday morning, Allen was running late again. He called Monique, then put on the only clean clothes he had, a medium-blue summer shirt and tan khaki bellbottoms. He slipped the armband over one short sleeve, said good-bye to Trudy, and left for school. On yet another warm smoggy morning, the heavy traffic was back, and he was caught in a jam near downtown. Allen turned onto Harding Place and parked after seven-thirty. He ran by a cop car parked near the crosswalk, then right upstairs with his box. Although he was late, he took a minute to write a prompt on the board before hurrying down for duty.

This time, the lines were almost normal at the cafeteria. A uniformed cop stood with Nash at the north arch, Deniker patrolled the coliseum, and Cecil was in Allen's duty area. The guard was talking to Monique, who had her coffee cup and two saucer-sized cinnamon rolls. Cecil was just finishing his sentence. "... make it through this day here an' we should be okay." He turned to Allen. "Mornin'."

"Hi, sorry I'm late—hit a traffic jam." He nodded to Monique. Her mouth was full.

"Right on time for me to start my rounds," Cecil said.

"Looks pretty good. How many cops?"

"Two if it stays quiet. Don't ya'll worry, we'll be okay." Cecil smiled and walked off.

"So how did you end up here, Monique?"

She swallowed, holding up napkins and the rolls, the partially eaten one

separated from the other with waxed paper. "Missed breakfast, thought I'd eat here and go upstairs with you. This one's for you, if you'd like it."

"Thanks, I didn't eat either." He glanced at Deniker near the quiet lines as she gave him the bun. "Well, I guess we can try for some normalcy today."

"We can give it a shot." They ate and chatted until the warning bell, then went up to their rooms.

Twenty boys showed up for homeroom. A few were despondent, but some others seemed to be excitable and nervous, especially after a cherry bomb went off outside. Allen attached a note to the attendance list to tell Schultz that Aaron, yet to have his intervention, was there.

After the Pledge and a short reminder that they were on a regular schedule, Darrel pointed at the armband on Allen's sleeve. "Is that for Reverend King, Mister Greene?" A few boys laughed before Allen told Darrel that he was right.

His first-period class came in more subdued than the homeroom boys. Because of suspensions, the small class was now about the same size as Creative Writing, and there were also five absent. Two doleful-looking girls had their heads down. Allen left them alone.

Taking attendance during fluency time, he stopped at Sandra's desk. She was still in Sunday clothes, a pressed chartreuse dress, black armband, and faux pearls. He spoke to her softly. "Hi, Sandra. All set now with Mrs. Eichler?"

She looked up with a brief affirmative smile, then kept writing. After they put away their notebooks, Allen quickly explained the difference between an autobiography and a biography. "I want you to be Doctor King's biographer today. There are no wrong answers, just tell what you know and remember about him, and, if you want, how you feel about his death."

The fifteen students made five matches plus an extra low reader for whom Allen would transcribe. There were four readers there who never tutored, including the two girls who had their heads down. The kids did the work willingly, interrupted only by a couple of explosions somewhere near the gym. After the transcribing, Allen worked with the low readers while the tutors wrote their papers. The two downcast girls had perked up a bit and also did the work.

With about ten minutes remaining, he said, "Okay, hang on to your papers for a minute. Tutors, remember, those were private thoughts you heard today." Most of the kids looked at him seriously. There were a couple of grumbles.

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“Maybe one or two of you might want to share your first draft now—we have a few minutes.” He paused. “Completely voluntary—anyone?”

Sandra’s hand went up, and then Charmane’s. The girl who Charmane regularly tutored, Francis, hesitantly raised her hand.

“Thank you, that’s plenty for now. If you’d like, more of you can read aloud tomorrow. Sandra?”

“I’m gonna stand up, Mister Greene.”

“Sure.”

Sandra cleared her throat and started reading without looking up. “I forget exactly where Martin Luther King was born. I know it was in the South like my mom an’ my aunt. They have stories about growin’ up down there, about how if you don’t complain, the white man pat you on the back like a farm animal. You complain, you get beat up or worse. I think that’s how it probably was for Doctor King.

“My aunt says he was smart and got to go to college. She says he cared about everybody, always comin’ back to help his people—in the city too, places like here and Chicago. He’s famous all over the world and won that big prize, but Doctor King used the money to help poor people—black and white.” Sandra stopped for a loud explosion somewhere inside the building. Some of the kids mumbled to each other. “You want me to go on, Mister Greene?”

“Quiet, please,” he told two nearby boys. “Yes, please, Sandra.”

“They say a white man shot him, but I’m tryin’ not to hate white people because Doctor King said that was wrong, jus’ like when white people hate us. My uncle says they’ll never catch that man because they don’t want to. My aunt tol’ him the problem is men, not jus’ white men. She said it’s men who do the killin’ no matter where—an’ he got mad. I jus’ know I’m sad my baby won’t see Doctor King alive again. So I’ll have to tell her all about him.”

The room was silent. Allen made a long exhale. “Very good, Sandra. Thank you.”

“Welcome.” She sat, staring down at her paper.

He turned to Charmane and Francis. “You two can read tomorrow, okay? All right, last thing. You’ve all heard there might be trouble this week—” The bell rang; the kids didn’t move. “Well, maybe there won’t be, but if there is, please be careful and stay away from it. See you later.” They handed in their papers, then left, talking quietly.

At the beginning of his prep hour, he tried to read the King papers, but he went to the windows twice for explosions. The second time, he saw the backs of some boys, running off toward the gym. He hit the PA button and waited a while, but there was no answer.

Allen tried to relax and breathe for a minute, but he heard more commotion outside. He went to an open window and saw three high-school guys beating up on two Marshall boys. “Knock it off, now!” They ran away, laughing. The two younger boys writhed on the ground as Cecil and a uniformed cop came into the coliseum.

The intercom crackled. “Attention, teachers.” It was Venable. “Double-check immediately to be sure your classrooms are locked.” Allen went out to the hall. Monique was locking her door as about fifteen kids, mostly boys, ran away from her toward the north stairwell. “Hey!” he yelled, but none of them turned back. “Were those yours, Monique?”

“A few of them—they got up and left when the others came to the door.” Another boy snuck out behind her.

“Stop right there!” The boy ignored him and sprinted away. Allen turned to Monique. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, but please come on in for a minute.”

They walked into the room. Her remaining eighth-graders, mostly girls, were in their seats, looking up apprehensively at static from the intercom. Schultz came on. “Your attention, please. In a few minutes, we will ring a bell for the end of classes today. Students are to walk with your period-two teacher to the front steps, where you will be dismissed. Teachers on extra duty, then go to your locations, please. All gates will be closed after ten minutes—students may enter the office from out front if they need to make a call. Wait for the bell now, and please stay calm. We’ll see you all tomorrow.”

Monique turned to her class. “Okay, we’ll be walking out with Mister Greene.” A few kids stood right away.

Allen motioned with both arms for them to sit down. “Easy, not yet.”

Her students chatted nervously until the bell rang a couple of minutes later. They followed the teachers out to the hall, where there were about a dozen more kids, including Sandra, Charmane and some other seventh-grade girls, plus Marlon, Darrel, and a few homeroom boys. They all walked up to Allen and Monique. Sandra carried a notebook, one text, and her purse. Some of the others were lugging two or three schoolbooks.

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“Why aren’t you kids with your second-period teacher?” Allen looked at Sandra.

“We’re all in the same class, Mister Greene—she let us go.”

Charmane scoffed. “Ol’ Aunt Bea was afraid to go out.”

“Okay, you can just come with us.”

The handful of remaining boys from Monique’s class joined the ones in the hallway. About twenty-five kids headed for the middle stairs with Monique and Allen.

“Mister Greene, did you check our poems?” Charmane scowled at Marlon, who was close enough to hear her question.

“Afraid I’m behind on my homework, Charmane.”

“Yeah, me too.” She adjusted the black armband on the sleeve of her long white dress as they started downstairs.

Sandra was on her other side. “Mister Greene, I don’t have my math or science books. Can I go to my locker?”

“Where is it?”

“Third floor cafeteria, by my homeroom. I gotta get ’em—those are the classes I’m behind in.”

“You can’t go now, Sandra. I guess you two could walk back when we go over there for duty, but then you’ll have to wait a little while and leave school with us.”

“That’s okay, we need to make a call anyway.”

When they came down to the first floor, the office and foyer were jammed with kids and a few adults. The middle of the crowd pushed toward the front door, where Godina and Frank were trying to keep things orderly.

Allen and Monique escorted the kids gradually to the door. She tugged Frank’s shirt to get his attention. “This is your duty area now?”

Frank had his arms up, trying to slow down some kids. “Yeah, they moved me here—I guess until Deniker’s free.”

“Lucky you,” Allen said. “Maybe we’ll catch you on the way out.”

“Yeah, you two stay on your toes back there.”

They dismissed their kids into a dispersing throng that encircled the squad car in front of the school. At the curb, Allen turned back to the crowded stairs, then to Monique, Sandra and Charmane. “Maybe we should go around, ladies.” The girls grinned slightly before the four of them walked off toward

the north end of the grounds. They went around the corner and into the coliseum; a janitor locked the gate behind them.

A string of dull-sounding firecrackers rattled off somewhere on the other side of the cafeteria. Fogle and the other teacher had yet to show up for emergency duty while Nash, of course, had opted out. They crossed over to Allen's area, where only two kids hurried by into Main. Allen stopped, took out a hall pass from his wallet, then hesitated, gazing out at the strange lack of activity between the two archways.

Charmane arched her brow. "What's wrong, Mister Greene?"

"Nothing. Okay, after you guys go to Sandra's locker, I want you to come straight down to Mrs. Morgan in the cafeteria, then back out here with her." He signed the paper. "Then we'll all go out front together." He handed the pass to Sandra.

"Thanks, Mister Greene."

Monique forced an upbeat smile. "*Oui, merci*, we'll see you back here in about fifteen minutes."

She and the girls started off for the nearby south entrance to the cafeteria, passing a solitary boy going the opposite direction. The kid entered Main, where Fogle waited just inside the door, although he was supposed to be outside.

Allen looked to the left at the quiet street. Moments later, somebody far behind him moved a metal trashcan. He turned to the noise—a line of mostly big boys, two of them wearing all black, moved by in a low lurching sprint under the north arch to the cafeteria doors. By now, only the south door was supposed to be unlocked.

He took tentative steps toward the boys, then a few more hurried by. He recognized one in black—Rupert. Allen started to shout, but they were gone; the door was evidently ajar or open. He ran for the nearby south entrance, cursing himself for letting the girls go into the building.

Allen went in and quickly checked the office doors for the cook, nurse, and security guards. They were all locked, but there was a light under the nurse's door, so he knocked hard—no answer. He slammed both fists on the metal—still nothing. Allen ran for the stairwell, where Monique was hurrying toward him down the narrow hall from the cafeteria.

"We need a phone, Allen! A big gang of boys just ran upstairs—some are from Grant."

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"I know, but nobody back there answers. I'll go up and see if I can get to the girls before they do."

"And if you do?"

He started upstairs. "We'll hide or run—I don't know."

"I'll go to Main to get help. Be careful."

"Okay, *you* be careful." He was already halfway up to the second floor. Skipping three stairs at a time, he passed the landing and saw two Marshall boys in black standing guard up at the third floor—they took off right away.

He came to the top and stopped to look down the corridor. The gang was at the far end, surrounding somebody, yelling and laughing. Maybe they were just messing with each other, but he ran toward them, shouting, "All right, that's it, the cops are right behind me!"

An older voice above the others called out, "We're outta here, forget her!"

Her? Damn it. The gang thinned out, fleeing down the far stairs. As the bodies cleared, only two remained. One was Sandra, the back and one side of her lime-green dress splotted with blood. She was crouched, facing Rupert, who pointed a switchblade right at her, a streak of blood on his own cheek.

He was cackling. "Had enough, bitch?" He saw Allen in his peripheral vision and swung the knife his direction.

"It's over, Rupert, the cops are right behind me."

"Fuck you, Charlie." He shuffled backwards, turned, then casually skip-galloped down the stairs as if he were heading for his next class. Sandra remained stooped over in a daze, both arms straight ahead, her fingernails extended like tiny scarlet bayonets, ready for more battle.

Allen moved in front of her. “Easy, Sandra, take it easy. He’s gone.” She had a bad wound behind one ear; blood ran along her neck and beneath the collar, soaking through the fabric down her side. She finally dropped her arms and turned to him.

“Mister Greene.” She started to fall.

Allen lunged but couldn’t catch her head before it thumped on the linoleum, the rest of her a sickening mass of crimson and chartreuse. He kneeled, put one hand behind her neck and saw some white material in a side pocket of her dress. He took out the folded hankie and used it to apply pressure to the cut, but some blood began to soak through.

“Shit.” He got down to both knees and put his arms all the way under her, then struggled to his feet with the hefty girl. Reaching with his hand that held the makeshift compress, Allen pressed it onto her neck again. He carried her back to the other end of the hall, his arms aching by the time he got there.

Navigating down the steps, he had to lean on the iron banister to keep his balance. Halfway to the bottom, his arms began to tremble from fatigue. *Think about something else—where’s Charmane?* Before he made it down to the first floor, Sandra’s blood had soaked through her dress and into his light summer shirt, turning sticky on his chest.

The hall below was empty; Allen could barely feel his arms, so he readjusted her body to regain his circulation. He hobbled over to the nurse’s door, turned around and struck the base as hard as he could with the heel of one of his sturdy shoes. Sandra moaned, her eyes still closed. He gave the door

another hard backwards blow. “C’mon lady!” Allen took a step toward the exit, then someone moved the door handle behind; he turned.

The young blonde school nurse opened the door, her eyes open wide. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“What’s it look like to you?” He started by her, his arms about to give out.

“There’s a cot in the main office—she can wait for an ambulance there.”

Allen saw her name badge as he went by. “She can wait here, Miss Swanson.” Inside the white office, he was vaguely aware of a scale, eye chart, and a padded examination table; some tall grey cabinets stood by the far wall.

“You can’t just come in here like this.”

He laid Sandra as gently as he could on the table. “I already did.” He pressed the wound, and she groaned again. “Okay, nurse, there’s the cut, and she has a knot on the back of her head.”

Swanson came over but only gave Sandra’s injuries a cursory look. She left Allen a light blanket and hurried to her desk. “I’m calling the office right now.” She reached for the phone on the wall.

Allen pulled the cover up to Sandra’s neck. “Make sure an ambulance is on the way.”

“I’ll do more than that.” She made the call and spoke to Venable, describing the situation in one long frantic sentence and complaining about “some teacher in my office.” She demanded that Mrs. Ishimoto be sent immediately, then turned to him, smug and angry at once. “The ambulance is already on the way, and so is Mrs. Ishimoto.”

“Fine, help me slow the bleeding and clean her up. Maybe she’s cut somewhere else.”

“By now you’d see if there was another bad wound—what you’re doing is correct procedure. The ambulance will probably be here in less than ten minutes.”

“Then why the hell can’t you help?”

“We’re not allowed to treat serious wounds.”

“What are you *here* for, Miss Swanson?”

“Prevention and . . . I don’t have to answer to you.”

“Okay, so *prevent* something. Get me some towels, moisten some of them, and bring damp washrags, half of them cold.”

“I’ll do it, but *you* are responsible.”

“I get it—move, for God’s sake.”

Sandra mumbled a bit while Allen watched the nurse grudgingly pull linen from a cabinet and begin to wet some of it in her sink. She brought over the towels and washcloths before returning to her desk.

“Thanks a million.” He wadded a cold towel with his other hand and put it under the knot at the back of her head. The hankie still in place, Allen cleaned around the wound without touching it. Swanson was right, there was only the one bad gash.

When he let the saturated hankie drop to the floor, blood began to drip onto the table. He re-applied pressure right away with a wet towel, then took a damp cloth and draped it over Sandra’s forehead; she murmured. Swanson was beneath him now in plastic gloves and a surgical mask, snatching up the fallen hankie from her immaculate floor—she minced over to the trashcan with it as if she carried pestilence. Someone tried the door, then knocked, but Swanson didn’t move.

Trying not to bother Sandra, Allen kept himself from shouting. “Open the door—now.”

Still in her mask, Swanson grabbed her large purse and held it to her chest. “What if it’s, uh, one of—” There was another knock.

“Open up, damn it.”

She walked slowly toward the door, her hand holding something inside the purse. Allen watched fresh blood seep to the center of the washrag. “C’mon, move it.”

She poked the button in the handle with her free hand to release the lock, then jumped away. Monique walked in with Charmane.

Allen sighed. “Thank God you’re both okay.”

“Mrs. Morgan,” the nurse said, flabbergasted.

Charmane went right to Sandra, reaching up to hold her shoulder. “How is she, Mister Greene?”

“She’s hurt pretty badly, but she’s going to be okay.” Monique was already at the table, removing the bunched washrag from Sandra’s forehead. She began to fold it. “Thanks, Monique. Did they call Sandra’s family?”

She applied the neat cloth to Sandra’s brow. “Her aunt’s out of town, but Charmane had the office call her mom and the ambulance before I even got there.”

“Good going, Charmane.”

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She was watching her friend, tears lodging in the corners of her eyes.

The school nurse *tsked*. “I can’t allow all these people in here, especially that child.”

Allen didn’t look up to answer. “She isn’t a child, and she’s staying here for now.”

“I am reporting *all* of this.”

Monique turned to her. “You won’t have long to wait, Miss Swanson. Mister Schultz isn’t far behind us.”

“I *asked* for Mrs. Ishimoto.”

“Too bad.” When Allen said that, Charmane was glaring at the nurse, so he gave Monique a peek at the wound and snatched a clean towel, tossing the bloody one out of Charmane’s sight.

Monique smiled at Charmane and put her other arm around her. “They’ll be here soon, sweetheart. They’ll take real good care of Sandra—she’ll be okay.” Sobbing a little, Charmane hugged her homeroom teacher around the waist and didn’t let go.

The principal opened the door without knocking and came in with Deniker and a cop. Holding a walkie-talkie, Schultz looked at Sandra, her three caretakers, and then the nurse at her desk.

Swanson got up. “Sir, I want to file a complaint.”

Schultz turned from her and approached the examination table, watching Allen. “Mister Greene, what’s the situation?”

He described the wounds, then pointed at Swanson. “She wouldn’t treat her, so we’re doing what we can. It’s still bleeding, but it’s starting to slow a little. It was Rupert Washington who cut her.”

Schultz sent Deniker and the cop out to check the building, then he came the rest of the way to the table. “Let’s have a quick look.” Allen lifted the cloth, then resumed the pressure.

Schultz shook his head. “Okay, keep it up. The ambulance had a flat—they’re changing it. It’ll be at least ten more minutes.” He pointed his radio at the nurse. “Do you know how to dress this wound, Miss Swanson?”

“Yes, but it needs stitches, sir.”

“Wouldn’t a firm dressing help to slow the bleeding?”

“Maybe, along with the pressure.”

“Then do it.”

"You know our guidelines, Mister Schultz—I can't be responsible for this." She got up again.

"The responsibility is mine. Go on, Miss Swanson."

"If you say so." She reached for a small white cart.

Allen shook his head and mumbled, "Thank you, Florence Nightingale."

Charmane looked fiercely again at the school nurse. Wheeling the cart to the cabinets, Swanson turned to Schultz. "I want him out of my way. Mrs. Morgan can help me."

"Okay, Mister Greene, please let Mrs. Morgan in there."

"Fine." He switched places with Monique; Charmane took over the washcloth on her friend's forehead. Sandra moaned with the new activity as Allen and Schultz backed up closer to the door. The principal went out in the hall to answer his radio.

Swanson finished placing gauze, pads, tape, ointments, metal implements and more linen on the cart, then pushed it over, glaring at Charmane. "That girl isn't needed here."

With her free hand, Monique squeezed Charmane's arm. "Thanks, dear, the nurse needs plenty of room. Please wait over there with Mister Greene."

Charmane closed her eyes for a moment, then let go of the cloth and patted Sandra's shoulder again. She started slowly over to Allen. He saw that her birthmark had darkened, flush with blood. "How did you get away from that gang, Charmane?"

"They let me go when you yelled at them." Her scornful eyes darted back to the nurse. Swanson began to treat the wound while Monique maintained the pressure when she could.

Schultz came back in, looked at Swanson, then turned to Allen. "I'm leaving to deal with another problem. If you don't mind, wait here for the ambulance. They'll drive it right into the coli—uh, courtyard." He reached for the door, nodding to Charmane. "Thanks for your help today, young lady."

She turned from Sandra for a moment and looked up at him miserably. "You're welcome."

Schultz left; Allen propped the doors open so he could hear the ambulance. They all watched Swanson until she finally stopped working and faced Monique. "That holds it pretty well, just keep up the pressure." She glared at Allen. "And *I'll* begin my report."

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Allen put his hand on Charmane's shoulder. "We can go see her now."

After they walked over, Monique gave a dry washcloth to Charmane. "Here, *amour*, put some nice cool water on this and wring it out, please." Eager to help, Charmane smiled slightly and hurried past the frowning nurse to the sink.

Monique spoke to Allen in a low tone. "After they get here, I'll go with Charmane to call her parents. I can drive her over to County General."

"They'll take Sandra way over there?"

"That's the closest public hospital. Anyway, they won't allow Charmane in the room, but at least she can wait outside."

"I'll come over as soon as I can get out of here."

Charmane returned with the cloth. It wasn't dripping, but Monique said, "Please wring it out a little more, dear."

"Okay."

As soon as she left for the sink, Monique peeked at the wound, then whispered, "Allen."

He winced at some blood seepage in the dressing. Monique resumed the pressure before Charmane returned and looked keenly at Allen. "What's wrong, Mister Greene?"

"We're just impatient for the ambulance to come."

Swanson slammed a desk drawer. "I just heard the doors close outside. Now maybe things will get back in order."

Allen was already in the doorway, heading for the outside exit. He held the door all the way open and waited. Seconds later, a gurney rolled around the corner, pushed by an attendant, another one lagging several feet behind—the same two who came for Ronnie and Del's incident.

Jahan Singh's white uniform was smudged with dirt and grease, presumably from changing the tire. He hurried the gurney by Allen and through the door, thanking him. Ernie Shaw walked up, grinning, his uniform spotless, its short sleeves rolled all the way up, Elvis-style, to show off his muscular arms. His receding blond hair was combed over; he had a pack of Luckies folded into one sleeve, the brand's red circle showing through the thin white material.

The attendant paused a moment to take in Allen's appearance, especially his facial hair, then his chest. "I remember you, teach." He pointed. "Who shot you?"

Allen lowered his chin for a glimpse of his shirt. Like one of Monique's color-blending art lessons, the blood had soaked into the blue fabric to make a large purplish stain shaped like a lopsided continent on a map.

Shaw smirked and walked casually by, making a condescending salute, as he might to a hotel doorman. "Ol' John there acts like he's going to a fire."

Literally biting his lip, Allen followed him into the office; Singh was already with Sandra, putting on gloves. The nurse stood behind her desk. "Thank God you're here, Ernie."

"Hey, Swanny-babe what's wrong?" He went over to her.

Charmane was a few feet from Singh, watching him inspect the patient and check vital signs. Allen scowled at the lovebirds; she was explaining what happened in a long whine. Her almost middle-aged suitor put his arm around her.

"Mister Shaw, I need you to check this." Singh was holding the dressing with the plastic gloves, Monique at his side.

"Okay, be there in a sec."

I'll be goddamned. "Right now, Romeo."

Shaw sneered at Allen. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, who put you in charge?" He grinned to Swanson.

"Nobody, but I'll get somebody here right now." He started for the wall phone.

"Relax, teach, everything's under control." Shaw and Swanson walked over to Sandra, everyone glowering at them. "All you people are too serious, including you, John."

Singh moved back a step, and Monique joined Charmane. Shaw began his inspection, Swanson standing right by, the top button of her blouse open suggestively. Her arm grazed the anchor tattoo on her boyfriend's left biceps as he worked.

Shaw turned to her. "Skin and blood under her nails—the girl got in some licks. This is a nice job, babe, but it's starting to come through a little—the blade must've nicked an artery. Okay, let's get her going."

Allen went back by the door to Monique and Charmane, who were talking quietly to each other and watching Sandra being prepared for the move. Swanson minded the wound while the attendants lifted Sandra from the table. She grumbled unconsciously as they transferred her to the gurney.

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Charmane and Monique went to the nurse's door to hold it for Singh, while Allen ran to open the one outside. Pushing the gurney and holding Sandra's wound with his other hand, Singh went through the doorway but kept turning to look for his partner.

Allen ran back in as Monique and Charmane came out. He opened the nurse's door to find Shaw with his arm around her. "Jesus, are you going to do your goddamn job or not?"

Shaw scoffed at Allen, then touched her cheek. "See you tonight, Swanny."

Allen stayed at the door to make sure the medic was leaving, then waited for him in the hall.

"Okay, here we go, teach, and I got some advice for you."

"Yeah? Save it for posterity." They went out. Allen walked ahead of him toward the corner of the building.

"Posterity, huh?" Shaw sniggered, looking around to be sure they were alone as he caught up. "Don't know if you're some kinda hippie or what, man. I do know this—the niggers don't want white boys down here teaching 'em how things are supposed to be. Hell, they throw rocks at *us* when we come to scrape up uncle or junior." Shaw pointed at him. "You're gonna lose more 'n that pretty hair if you don't leave 'em alone—that's what they want, for you to leave 'em alone."

Allen shook his head. "Like I said, do your damn job."

"That's all you got for me, teach?"

Singh was waiting with Sandra behind the ambulance, and Cecil was also there, applying pressure to her wound. Monique and Charmane watched from outside the entrance to Main. Another explosion echoed through the coliseum. Two high-school boys ran to the locked north gate and scrambled over the chain-link.

"Those were M-80's." Shaw laughed. "Yup, they're gonna get you teach, one way or the other." They came closer to Singh, who was straightening his tall frame after ducking from the blast. Cecil had the radio to his ear.

Shaw went to the back doors of the ambulance as Allen walked up to the gurney. Sandra had her eyes open and was talking to Singh and Cecil. She turned her head. "Mister Greene, he says I'm going to be okay. Is that right?"

"You bet, Sandra. Your mom and Charmane will be waiting at the hospital. I'll see you there in a little while."

Los Angeles, 1968

Monique and Charmane went into Main as Allen and Cecil jogged through the empty coliseum behind the slowly departing ambulance. At the same gate the boys had scaled minutes before, Cecil started grumbling because someone had locked it since the ambulance arrived.

As the guard sorted through his wad of keys, Allen knocked lightly on the side window of the ambulance. Sandra tried to smile back. The medic had one hand on her neck, the other held a copy of *National Inquirer*. Shaw looked up at Allen, rolling his eyes. Cecil opened the gate, then the long vehicle rolled into the street, Sandra looking around helplessly while Shaw read his periodical.

Meat wagon—now I get it.

As the ambulance left quickly, no siren, Cecil closed the gate. He unlocked the north entrance to the school and they entered, but Cecil stayed by the stairwell for some reason. Allen walked down the first-floor corridor toward the office, hoping to catch Monique and Charmane.

Not only was the hall quiet, someone had turned off the main lights. The first two rooms were dark and the third had the outside shades drawn, but the lights were on. His back arched over a pile of mid-semester report cards, Nash worked on his grades with a sinister grin—a lugubrious opera throbbed from inside the room.

Allen went on. A small firecracker blew off ahead and some glass shattered, the noise reverberating down the corridor. He moved cautiously toward a shout and a slamming door from near the office. He walked faster and came around the corner into the foyer.

Glass shards by his feet, Deniker was searching outside through the front door's thick window. He had a radio in his hand. A pane of the trophy case was gone, but the display of ribbons, plaques and group photos seemed undisturbed, save for a dusting of glass splinters. Linda stood just inside the office in a grey suit, an armband on her sleeve. She stared at the destruction, her arms folded as if she were cold.

“A goddamn ladyfinger.” Deniker was swearing to himself over the smallest kind of firecracker they made. He turned halfway around, clipping the radio to his belt without looking directly at Allen. Deniker craned his neck toward the door again, grumbling. “You’re all supposed to be out of here.”

Los Angeles, 1968

“Fine, I’m going in a minute.” Allen reached for the doorknob and entered the office. Linda was the only one there, staring glumly now at some papers on her desk. “They left you to hold down the fort?”

She looked up, her face blank. “Hi.”

“Did you see—” He stopped because she was pointing at his chest.

“Allen, is that what I think it is?”

The gory shirt had slipped his mind again. “Afraid so.” She bowed her head reverently. He waited several moments for her to look up. “Did you see Mrs. Morgan and Charmane leave?”

Her dark eyes moist, she nodded. “They left for the hospital before that firecracker. How is Sandra doing?”

“She woke up and was talking. I think she’ll be okay.”

“Thank God.” She paused, making a long sigh. “Did you hear the announcement that the buildings are to be vacated?”

“Deniker told me. Shouldn’t you be going too?”

“In twenty minutes—he’ll be out there until then.” She glowered at the guard in the foyer, then faced Allen. “You must have had quite a morning.”

“Yeah.” He glanced at the back offices. “What have they said about tomorrow?”

“They’re going to try again for a regular day.”

“Then I have to run a ditto—can I ask a favor?”

“Of course.”

“Could you find the address for County General? I know it’s near Boyle Heights, just not sure exactly where.”

“I’ll get it for you right now.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re very welcome.”

A bit puzzled by her emphatic answer, he went into the lounge, where a teacher’s aide and a custodian were talking. Allen just nodded, then went to his box in the hall and found the assignment page he had left there. He needed to burn a master in a contraption that didn’t always work, then hope for the ditto machine to behave.

He went back to the office. She was still alone, finishing a call. “Linda, any chance I could use the photocopy machine?”

“Sure. Here’s the address you wanted and the nearest main intersection.”

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She handed over the note along with a grey cartridge about the size of a thick candy bar.

He read the paper. "Good, I know about where that is. Don't I need to sign for the key?"

"I'll put down my name, the office is way under limit."

"Okay, thanks."

She made a slight, lackluster smile. He left and passed by the now vacant lounge into the back workroom. The copier resembled a grey coffin over a long cabinet of the same color. Allen inserted the key into the slot at its side, lifted the rubber flap on top and placed the page carefully on the convex glass at the spot for 8.5 X 11 masters. He selected the correct tray, twisted the dials for the number of copies, then hit the start button.

The massive machine thumped, thought for a moment, and then rattled before it began to *ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk*; the copies started to spit out, each one making a satisfying *click*, moments apart, against the edge of a distant metal tray.

The steady rhythm of the copier made him a bit drowsy. He had a couple of minutes, so Allen returned to the lounge, leaned back in an arm chair and rested his eyes, listening to the distant *ka-chunk, ka-chunk* for several moments.

He heard a door shut behind, sat up, then got to his feet. *Man, gotta take a leak.*

"Well, look who's here, hiding from the huddled masses."

He turned around to see Nash standing with his briefcase by a table. *Easy, Allen.*

"They want everyone out of the building."

"I know." He headed into the workroom and heard Nash following him. Allen removed his papers from the tray.

"A hundred and forty-five copies?" Nash was facing the display at the front of the machine, his briefcase in tow. "Do you realize you have already exceeded your share of the department's allotment?"

Allen held the pile to his chest.

"Well, Mister Greene?"

"You can bill me."

"I might very well do that." Nash leaned over, opened the flap and removed the master. "Let's just have a look at this." He read for a few moments. Holding

the sheet by one corner as if it were flypaper, he handed it over. "Poetry again? Langston Hughes and Archibald MacLeish?"

"That's right." Allen turned away and put his pile down; there was blood on the page that had been on his chest. He put the soiled paper and the master on the bottom, yanked the copier key and put it in his pocket, then began to straighten the pile.

Nash was still standing there. "Beyond the fact that your propaganda is extraneous to the curriculum, why does every student need to have one?"

Allen picked up the copies and held them at his side, debating with himself whether to answer or go straight to the bathroom. He faced Nash. "Because some kids will *like* the poetry and might even want to read it again."

"Good glory, look at you." He pointed at Allen's shirt. "Were you in class like that? What is it, juice?"

"Yeah, spilled it in my car." He started for the door. Nash followed, scolding him with non-stop patter.

". . . in school like that? Do you have *any* concept of our standards of professional conduct and—"

"Don't you ever stop running your goddamn mouth?" Allen entered the lounge, Nash right behind.

"And for *that*, Mister Greene, you can expect an official reprimand, and it's possible that your termination could very well begin a few weeks early."

Allen faced him again. "You don't have the clout—Schultz won't buy it."

"We'll see about that." Nash walked out the side door with his briefcase and a supercilious smirk.

Allen went into the office and gave Linda the cartridge. "I should sign for these copies—Nash knows I made them."

"Don't worry. I'll handle him."

Her acerbic tone gave him pause. "Okay, thanks again." He went out, but Nash was pontificating to Deniker at the middle stairway, so Allen turned right to take the longer route up the south stairs. He passed Frank's dark room, then listened to his own footfalls in the corridor and on the steps, echoing through the school.

At the second floor, his full bladder ached; he couldn't put it off any longer. Allen walked into the wing of mostly math classrooms and took a right turn immediately into the boys' lavatory. The lights were off, but a small opaque

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window allowed him to make out the urinals ahead. He put his copies on the edge of a sink, moved over and reached for his zipper, but the lights came on. He turned around to at least ten high-school boys, mostly masked, standing back by the stalls. Allen took a step for the door, but a chubby guy moved over there right away. About half of them were at least six feet tall, one as huge as a pro-football lineman. Some wore slacks and good shirts, others jeans and tees; several had thin nylon stockings pulled over their heads, altering their faces. Most of the rest wore bandanas like outlaws in a cowboy movie, but the few who weren't masked looked nervous.

A short guy at the front sent the chubby one out to stand guard, then two tall slim kids replaced him at the door. The apparent leader was only about five-six, but not small in any other way. His square waist and thick legs filled his blue jeans; a white sleeveless T-shirt showed off brawny cocoa-brown arms. He had cut a slit in the nylon fabric for his mouth, but the mask didn't hide a large misshapen nose.

He finally spoke to Allen. "So whatta we got here?" The others were obediently silent. "I think it's a teacher, a big one." A few in the gang made low snickers.

A dark thin guy about six-two in a faded green poplin jacket stood at the leader's side. He had a shiny conk job and spoke in a subdued voice through his red bandana. "Naw, man, check the hair and threads. He's, what they call it, a flower child." Most of the gang seemed ready to laugh out loud, but they stifled themselves with chuckles and muffled wisecracks. The one in the green jacket motioned for them to keep it down.

Behind the leader, a guy about six feet tall squinted fiercely over his bandana. He had an enormous Afro that wouldn't have fit under a nylon stocking; a white scar stitched from his forehead up into his scalp. He kept pounding his fist into the other palm.

The gibes from the hippie joke faded. Sullen eyes glared from those wearing bandanas while two unmasked younger boys at the back shared a joint. His mouth dry and his neck pulsing, Allen wished they were all high. His best shot was to act confident and stall for a guard or cop to come by.

The leader stepped forward but was still several feet away. "You *are* a teacher, right?"

"Sort of." *Gotta piss so bad it hurts.*

The guy tilted his head slightly to one side. "What's that supposed to mean?" Allen moistened his chalky lips. "I'm temporary."

"You got *that* right, teach."

From over by the stalls, four or five younger boys, some in gold shirts, joined the back of the gang, hiding their faces behind the older ones, but Allen saw Sam among them.

The leader turned back. "Keep those little punks away, he might know some of 'em." He faced Allen again. "Okay, straight answers. Who's out there besides Schultz, the lady Jap, an' the fat spick?"

"Uh, two guards and some cops."

"How many is *some*?"

"I don't know, maybe two—"

"Then *say* that, goddamn it." He walked over and picked up the copies. "Poems, how nice." He dropped the pile into the sink and twisted the spring-loaded faucet for a couple of seconds. "So you come all the way across L.A. every day to *improve our inferior English*?" His pronunciation of the last few words was mockingly perfect. "That about right?"

"Not exactly. Look, they probably have more cops now. You guys probably haven't done anything they can arrest you for. Maybe you should think about—"

"*You* should think about shuttin' the fuck up."

The leader's lieutenant in the green jacket scoffed. "They arrest us for breathin', dumb-ass teacher."

Allen knew him from somewhere but turned back to the one in charge. "Okay, I know you don't have anything to lose here—"

"Nothin' to lose, huh?" Drooling, the leader drew an arm across his mouth as he moved forward. His white but uneven teeth and bizarrely distorted features came closer; Allen flashed to an old Halloween cartoon of a bloodthirsty mouth, cackling in the dark.

Green jacket right behind, the leader had to look up to speak directly to his captive. "Teach says we got nothin' to lose, thinks we jus' ignorant niggers got nothin' to live for."

"No, I—"

"Nobody asked you nothin'. Shut—the—fuck—up." Each word was angrier but not much louder than the last. He turned to his lieutenant again.

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“Maybe we jus’ don’t understand him, maybe he’s *concerned about our general welfare*.” His precise, sarcastic pronunciation again made the gang chuckle, some obligingly, perhaps not sure of what he meant.

Allen’s legs trembled. He hid his jittery fingers in a pocket. *It’d be real good, teach, if you don’t piss your pants.*

The leader reached ahead and flicked the second button on his shirt. “What’s all this, you bleedin’?”

“No.”

“Then where’d all the blood come from?” Some of the others moved a little closer to get a look at the stain.

“Does it matter?”

“Man, you don’t get the rules here—I ask the questions. Now what’d you do, knife somebody?” His voice was deadpan, but the others laughed, and green jacket quieted them, palms down.

“Of course not.”

“Of course not—shit.” He turned to the gang. “See? He thinks knifin’ somebody is just for *hoodlums* like us.” He faced Allen. “Right, teach?”

“I hope not.” He removed his hand from the pocket.

“He thinks we’re too violent.” He pointed, almost touching Allen’s nose. “*You fuckers* are the violent ones, draftin’ us into the army to do your killing.”

“Hey man,” green jacket said, “you want the cops to hear?”

“Yeah, let’s keep it down for a little lesson. Hold ’im.”

The taller boy went behind Allen and grabbed his arms, crossing them roughly, making his chest stick out. He removed Allen’s wallet and opened it. “Jus’ seven bucks.” He told a small guy to hold the money and drop the wallet in a toilet.

“C’mon, my driver’s license.”

“Tough shit, teach.” The leader’s face came within inches of Allen’s again. “Now, the blood—” He stopped for an explosion from the direction of Main. “Good, the cops can chase those punks all day. So where’s the blood from?”

“A student.”

“How’d it get on you?”

“I carried a girl after some big *brave* boy cut her.”

“Listen to that shit.” The leader turned. “That’s what we call *sarcasm*, class.”

He pointed to a guy in a nylon mask who was about the leader's height, cleaning his nails with a stiletto. "He's sayin' only cowards use a knife, man."

"Yeah? Don't need no knife to mess 'im up." He put the dagger away, stepping forward.

"You'll get your chance." The leader faced Allen. "My man must've been absent for the lesson on sarcasm."

"Obviously, you weren't."

"You hear me ask a question?"

"No."

"Then shut up." He turned to the others. "This teacher ain't jus' the man, he's fuckin' *Superman*, down here savin' all us poor black folk. An' Superman thinks he's a big hero." Several in the gang mimicked his words, taunting and jeering in low tones. The leader stood on his toes, almost nose to nose with Allen, the brown stocking damp around his mouth. "Carryin' that girl makes you a big hero, am I right, teach?"

"No." He sighed. "She was."

"Damn, you did it again. The rule in *this* class is you answer once, then you shut up unless we ask another question."

"All right, I'll do that." The leader threw an uppercut to Allen's gut. "Ohh—" *Son of a bitch*. He tried to catch his breath as the guy behind let him double over and the gang tried to restrain their laughter. A trickle of warm urine touched his groin, but he kept from releasing more.

The leader *tsked*, shaking his head. "Ya' see, teach, that wasn't a question, an' *right* after I told you my rule."

He straightened up slowly. Behind him, green jacket crossed Allen's arms again, not quite as tight.

"Good, you kept your mouth shut that time." The leader was a foot or two away. "Now you know my rule by heart?"

Allen took a long exhale. "The gist of it."

"Ooo, *gist*, a vocabulary word, class. Okay, I'll make it real simple for you, since you're such a slow student. The rule is, 'I keep my mouth shut after I answer the question.'"

"I keep my mouth—" Allen took another fist to the solar plexus, crumpling almost to his knees, but the guy behind kept him up again. He felt warm pee,

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this time all the way down to his upper thigh, but he stopped the stinging flow again. After he was pulled back up, he didn't lift his head.

The leader pushed up Allen's chin and got back in his face. "Since you're so dumb, now I'm tellin' you ahead a time that I'm askin' a question." He paused. "You teach your class what a interrogative is?"

Exhaling again, Allen eyed his tormentor. "Yes."

"When I said my rule, was that a interrogative?"

"No."

"See there? It was all your fault. Now, you think you can repeat the rule?"

"Yes."

"Then do it."

Not this time, sucker punching little shit.

"You know it or not?"

"I think so."

"Why don't you say it?"

"Do it' isn't an interrogative."

"Damn, you finally passed."

Green jacket was holding Allen with one hand. "Enough a' this shit, let's mess 'im up and get—" He stopped and snickered. "Look, man, he pissed his self."

"Say, teach, your bellbottoms are wet—you hold any back?" The gang laughed louder than before at the leader's joke.

Green jacket stopped chuckling. "Okay, cool it."

The leader looked at Allen, whose chin was down again. "Still gotta go, teach?"

He lifted his head. "Yes."

"Why you wearin' that?" He pointed at Allen's armband.

"For Doctor King."

"That's *your* goddamn violence again. I know why you wear it—so people think you liked him—to protect your white ass." The gang grumbled in agreement. "Is that right, teach?"

"Yes, that's probably right."

"Probably. Man, you'll jus' say any ol' shit to keep your ass from gettin' kicked."

"Yeah, maybe so."

“You messed up again, that wasn’t a question.”

Allen cringed, readying himself for another blow.

“No, man, not this time, my brothers here are fixin’ to mess you up good. Let ’im go.” Green jacket released his grip. “Okay, teach, take off the armband.”

What? He slowly pulled off the black elastic.

“You’re so stupid in my class, this’ll be your *remedial* lesson. How far from here to the pissers, teach?”

He turned to the two urinals. “Uh, four or five feet.”

“Okay, throw that thing into one of ’em.”

He tossed the armband; it hit the porcelain and fell below onto a pink sanitary cake.

“Well, you still gotta piss or not?”

Jesus. “Yes.” Allen walked up to a urinal, the one that didn’t have the armband.

“No, that one’s outta order.”

He moved over and unzipped his jeans.

“Okay, piss on it.”

He finished, zipped up and turned around. The gang was several feet away, most of them chortling.

The leader pointed. “You just pissed on the reverend’s memory. You shouldn’t a’ done that.”

Screw you.

“Answer me, Superman.”

Most of the gang laughed again—Allen shook his head, refusing. The leader took a step closer. “Answer me, damn it.”

He didn’t budge, but green jacket spoke up from behind. “You didn’t ask him a question.”

The leader’s mouth stayed open briefly. After slobbering on the mask again, he wiped his mouth. “You’re really a smart-ass, teach, but you’re gonna leave here with some bad marks. You get it—bad marks?”

“Very funny.” His heart thumped in his chest and neck.

The leader turned to the gang. “Who wants to finish our lesson?” The guy who pocketed the stiletto moved forward, then two others, the football lineman and the surly hood with the huge Afro, fitting himself with brass knuckles. They came closer—two amorphous faces under nylon, and one pair of malevolent dark eyes.

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Allen leaped for the galvanized trashcan that was between the urinals and the sinks. He latched onto it, slamming the can intentionally into the porcelain tiles. The racket echoed in the bathroom walls; the three hoods stopped briefly, then moved ahead. Allen lifted the can to defend himself.

“That’s it—leave ’im alone!” The shout came from behind the gang.

Everyone turned to see who yelled—a small boy pushed his way through the crowd in sunglasses and a grey sweatshirt with the hood pulled over. The guys nearby backed off a step, and Allen lowered the impromptu shield down to his waist. *My God, Ronnie?*

The leader faced the boy. “What you think you’re doin’?”

Ronnie walked right up to Allen, turned around, bristling at the three thugs. “I said leave ’im alone.”

The leader made a humorless, scornful laugh. “You punks ain’t here to tell us nothin’—get the fuck outta the way.” After Ronnie backed up closer to Allen and folded his arms, the leader growled. “Move ’im.”

The three guys took another step, but Ronnie pulled a zip gun from his front pocket and pointed it at them. They laughed at the weapon but stopped.

“Ronnie, I don’t think that’s a good—”

“Quiet, Mister Greene.”

“*Mister Greene*—shit.” The leader chuckled coldly. “You crazy, little man. You think that popgun gonna stop us?”

Ronnie defiantly aimed at the three guys in front. “Who wants it, then?” They retreated a step. Allen put the can down, wiped his sweaty palms, then held onto the rim.

The leader faced green jacket. “Talk some sense into him.”

From behind, a guy in a nylon mask spoke up. “Yeah, he’s *your* goddamn little brother.”

The leader turned back. “Shut the fuck up.”

The three guys out front had almost retreated back to the gang. Ronnie still pointed the gun at them, but he turned to his brother. “He’s the teacher who says my poems are good.”

The leader scoffed. “An’ you believe that bullshit?”

“You sayin’ my poems are no good?”

“I ain’t sayin’ nothin’—you better not be pointin’ that piece a’ crap at me.”

“Pointin’ it at them.”

Green jacket pulled down his bandana. “Everybody take it easy. I know

who this teacher is—he came to our house,” he said, then Ronnie lowered the gun a little.

The leader snarled at his lieutenant. “Who gives a shit? You gonna’ take the popgun or not?”

Ronnie’s brother grumbled. “I say we let the teacher go.”

“You tryin’ to take over?”

“Ain’t takin’ over nothin’. I’m *askin’* you to let him go. Ronnie’s got his reasons.”

The leader was silent. His masked features didn’t move under the thin material. He came out of his daze and walked by the three would-be enforcers. Ronnie tracked him with the zip gun, but it was directed at his feet. The leader removed a small revolver from his pocket and passed Ronnie as if he weren’t there. He pointed the gun at Allen’s chin. “Put the goddamn trash can down, and do it quiet.”

He laid it down gently, but the can rolled almost 360 degrees and rumbled back to his leg. Looking into the gun barrel, Allen’s neck trembled. “I didn’t try to do that.”

The leader scoffed, then lowered the revolver and snarled at Ronnie. “Now drop that thing.”

Ronnie had already let the gun down to his side. “No bullet anyway.” He defiantly released the small weapon. It landed on its masking-tape handle, hardly making a sound.

“I’ll say this, little man, you got some balls.” He wiped his mask, picked up the zip gun, then smirked at Allen. “Lucky for you, teach.” He turned away. “Let’s get outta here.”

The leader led the lot of them out to the hall. Joining his brother, Ronnie still didn’t look at Allen, who took a couple of steps back to the wall and slid all the way down the tiles to the floor. He exhaled and drew in some long breaths. *It’s cool down here.*

Eyes half-closed and his back against the tiles, Allen listened to a siren outside, another firecracker, then Linda's indistinct but cross words on the PA, searching for someone.

"Clear, ma'am," someone said, echoing in the bathroom walls. The voice sniggered. "Except you got a teacher lying down in here."

Allen turned. Deniker stood near the door. Ishimoto walked in past him, heels clicking on the linoleum, no sign of her condescending smile. "Well, if it isn't Mister Greene."

He stayed put, grinning wryly. "Just call me *Teach*."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Oh, that isn't nice. Too bad you didn't arrive a little sooner, madam principal-elect, there were some former students here who would've loved to say hello to you."

"What do you mean?"

Deniker stepped ahead of her. "That other gang was here?"

Allen chuckled. "Yup, but long gone now, off to some new fun and games."

An imperial sneer crossed Ishimoto's face. "Get up from there, Mister Greene, and pull yourself together."

He grinned, getting slowly to his feet. "Yes, ma'am, I'm together."

She pointed at his chest. "Is that blood?" She looked down at his damp trousers. "My God, did you—"

"Just a minute." Deniker approached Allen, pointing to his shirt. "Is all this blood from before with that girl, or did they cut you?"

“No, just a fist to the gut.” Allen puffed out his cheeks, pulling in his chest as if he’d just been slugged.

Ishimoto shook her head. “I don’t find this funny.”

“Really? You smile at everything else, expulsions, assassinations—”

“Enough!” Startled at first by her own shrill voice ricocheting through the bathroom, she tried to compose herself.

Deniker was still facing him. “How many were there—did you know any of them?”

“About ten, they wore masks,” he said more seriously.

Ishimoto backed off toward the exit while Deniker continued his questions. “Any from here?”

“A couple maybe—couldn’t tell who they were.”

“You didn’t recognize any voices?”

“Only the big kids spoke. Were they in some other trouble?”

“Far as I know, just with you. How did you get away?”

“Talked them out of it, more or less. They could’ve really wasted me, but they didn’t, so we’re even as far as I’m concerned. If they’re caught, I won’t file charges.”

From the doorway, Ishimoto raised an eyebrow. “Are you protecting someone?”

“Yeah, myself.”

“We’re not getting anywhere, Mister Deniker.” She glared at Allen again. “I’ll see you in my office with Mister Nash first thing in the morning—maybe your *last* morning.”

“Maybe, but I won’t come unless Greg is there.”

“Oh, *Greg* is it? He can’t bail you out this time.” She was already walking away, Deniker following her.

Allen went to the sink and fished out the soggy copies. He dropped them a few feet away, then took a wad of paper towels and tried to dry his pants. He got his wallet from the toilet, wiped it off best he could, then wetted more towels and began to rub at the blood in his shirt. His lower chest and stomach were tender from the two blows, so he stopped.

He tossed the towels and picked up his copies; some of them looked salvageable. Allen walked slowly out to the hall and upstairs to his room, where he spread the papers around to dry, enough for at least two classes.

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After carrying his box out to the hall, he locked the door. Two custodians were talking at the top of the middle stairs, so Allen went the other way to the north exit. He walked down and found Cecil by the first-floor stairwell, talking quietly with a tall young towheaded cop in full black uniform, including a side arm and nightstick.

He held the box to his chest against his soiled clothes and turned sideways as he walked by them making a casual wave. They just nodded back. Allen came to Nash's portal. He was back in his room, speaking seriously from his desk to someone out of view, probably one of his cronies.

Almost to the foyer, Allen turned to the noise of someone behind entering the hall. A high-school boy left Nash's door open and walked rapidly for the north exit. Cecil and the cop came out from under the stairs and escorted him outside.

What was that guy doing with Nash? He turned and saw Schultz in the office. Linda was still there with a family, embracing the mom. She released the woman, then nodded to the principal. *Tell Schultz about Nash? Crap, tell him what?*

Watching the family leave, Allen took a step or two to follow them out, then he stopped and glared at Nash's door. *What the hell.* He left his box on the floor, then hurried down the hall and walked into the room, closing the door behind.

Startled, Nash slammed his briefcase shut, but it caught on some papers; he yanked at them. "What are *you* still doing here?" He fooled unsuccessfully with the jammed briefcase.

Allen was just a few feet inside the room. "I could ask you the same thing."

"Whatever it is you want, make it quick, I'm leaving now."

"That boy who just left here, was he bothering you?"

"That is certainly none of your business. But since you have already invaded my privacy, I was having a pleasant chat with a former student—something you wouldn't know about, not having any former students." He stood up to put on his tan summer coat, an armband on its sleeve. Nash attached himself to the briefcase, though it was still ajar. He turned toward the other door, the chain clamoring over his desk.

Allen moved forward a couple more steps. Nash spotted the wet pants and wrinkled his nose. "Glory, and I suppose you have some bizarre explanation for that."

Feeling an adrenaline rush, Allen exhaled and unclenched his teeth. "Nothing more bizarre than why you're chained to that stupid briefcase."

Nash made a cold laugh from near his desk. "You and Williamson make a good pair. Our homegrown Negro agitator thinks he undermines my authority by reassuring the rabble that I am harmless, which is, in fact, true. He does a fine job of spreading those ridiculous old rumors."

"I saw you the other day in the parking lot with a high-school kid. I think Schultz would be interested in your little meetings."

"I doubt that. He's busy cleaning out his desk and reading travel brochures, for which we can all be thankful."

"You're lying about your little *chats* with former students."

Nash smirked, shaking his head. "Your incorrigible attitude is exceeded only by your lack of professionalism. I'll just add this little incident to Mrs. Ishimoto's list for tomorrow. Now leave my room."

"I'm going, but first I need something from you."

"I won't listen to any more of your nonsense." Nash completely enveloped his jammed briefcase with one arm as if he were a halfback clinging to an oversized football. He scooted toward the other exit.

Allen moved right over and easily intercepted him in front of the closed door. "What's your big hurry?"

Nash stayed several feet back from him. "I am not in a hurry. Are you forcibly preventing me from leaving my room?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. I just have a simple request before you go. I don't think you want that armband anymore—mine got ruined."

"What?"

He pointed to Nash's sleeve. "You heard me, I'm just asking for your armband."

"Ah, yes, you certainly wouldn't want to be without a symbol of your remorse for the dearly departed reverend. Well, you're right, I don't need it anymore. If it satisfies your pathetic devotion, please take it." He put the briefcase on the floor between his legs, removed the armband and dismissively tossed it like so much refuse onto the floor by Allen's feet. "Happy now? Step aside." Nash picked up his briefcase.

Allen squatted for the armband, then stood. "One last thing." He touched his stained shirt with the black elastic. "I think you should know what this *juice* is."

"What are you prattling about now? Move, this instant."

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“This is blood, Mister Nash. Not movie blood or TV blood, the real thing—blood from a kid in this school.”

Nash’s doughy clump of a nose flared. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“Maybe you could wonder why, or give a shit. If you had been out there just *standing* in your duty area, it might have kept a girl from being cut up and sent to the hospital.”

“Ridiculous.” Nash scoffed and took another step. “Move aside or I will report you for personal assault.”

“Oh?” Allen laughed. “Then maybe I should get my money’s worth.” He held up the armband, then began to rub it repeatedly into his bloody shirt.

Nash shuddered a bit. “What are you doing?”

“Mister S. Nash, a.k.a. Snash, English grammarian extraordinaire and despot of our non-union of teachers—since you cared so much about Doctor King, you shouldn’t be without an armband.” He rubbed it again into the blood.

“You are clearly unbalanced. Move!”

“Not until you get your memento. Catch.” He tossed it; Nash squealed slightly and tried to jump back, but the armband bounced squarely off his paunch. His tethered briefcase had whipped around and hit a desk, bursting open an inch or two. Nash immediately surrounded the luggage with both arms and pulled it to his chest protectively.

“What are you hiding, Snash?”

“You enjoy saying that, don’t you?” As he spoke, Nash was stuffing the jammed papers into the briefcase. He locked it with a key from the line to his belt, then faced Allen. “If you think I’m hiding something, then why don’t you report me? Oh, that’s right, there are several witnesses who will attest to your open and constant hostility toward me. Any suspicions from you will sound preposterous.”

“Maybe to Ishimoto.”

“I’ll take my chances, even with Schultz.” He made a smug grin. “And after what you just did, I will definitely include personal assault in my complaint.”

*Grab the briefcase? Shit, that **would** take an assault.*

“What’s wrong, Mister Greene? Ha!”

The door opened from the outside. Cecil and the same young cop were waiting there in the hall with Schultz.

Nash beamed. “Excellent, you gentlemen are right on time. I wish to file personal assault charges against this man.”

Allen shook his head. "I didn't touch him. The creep is hiding something—"

"Hold on," the cop told Allen, "I'll talk to you if I need to." He stepped in, holding out a document with his long arm. "Simon Matthias Nash?"

"I just told you, officer, this man assaulted me." Nash took the paper. "What's the meaning of this?"

"It's a search warrant for you, your residence, and this classroom, including that briefcase."

"What? That is preposterous—I refuse. Mister Schultz, you can't stand by and allow him to come in here and do this. I have my rights."

Schultz grinned. "Indeed you do, Mister Nash, and the officer has his duty."

"I have a right to call my lawyer."

The cop nodded. "Yes, after I arrest you. I have enough to do that now, but I'll do my search first. Unlock that briefcase."

"I certainly will not."

The policeman eyed the nest of keys attached to Nash's belt. "I have the authority to break it open."

"And destroy my personal property? We will see what my lawyer has to say about that."

"Over here." The officer took the briefcase and pulled Nash by the chain a few feet away.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"You're not cooperating, sir." The cop yanked him another foot or two and put the case flat on the ground, bracing it against the wall before he turned to Cecil. "Would you give that lock a good kick with your steel toe?"

"Sure, glad ta' help out." Cecil smiled at Nash, then moved his leg back as if he were kicking an extra point. His shoe struck the lock, but the case held. He wound up again and kicked much harder; it cracked open a little.

The tall officer leaned down and pried the lid halfway with his nightstick and searched inside. He put papers, report cards and a pocket Bible on the floor. Using his pen, he lifted out a small handgun by its trigger guard. "Is this registered to you?"

Nash just looked at him defiantly. After the cop had Cecil help him bust the chain to the briefcase, he frisked Nash at the wall before handcuffing him. "Simon Nash, you are under arrest for reckless endangerment, possession of a firearm in a public building, and as an accessory to trafficking firearms to minors. You have the right to . . ."

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After the cop finished the arrest, Nash sneered at Allen, then Schultz. “You two will rot in hell.” His voice was subdued but cocky as the policeman held his arm and the ruined briefcase. “My parents prayed for the day that these heathens would be put back in their place, and now they’re killing each other.” His tone was still muted, but almost euphoric. “Martin Lucifer King was only the beginning—I’ll be back to help reclaim this city and country for God Almighty.” The cop escorted him away.

At the classroom door, Allen turned to Schultz. “Jesus, Simon the Zealot.”

Schultz frowned. “Yes, and he’s not alone. One thing he is right about—he’ll be out before you know it, and after that, he could show up in some desperate school somewhere.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Oh, I could tell you way too many stories of reprobates hired to teach, but not right now.” They started down the hall.

“Who finally tipped you off to Nash?”

“Cecil. He took the briefcase thing seriously when he came here last fall—they laughed at him in security meetings. Cecil overheard something weeks ago and began tailing him. Nash was a middleman, setting up meetings, not having to touch the money or the weapons. I guess the guns didn’t show up in the news enough for him to get his thrills—started getting careless.”

“Didn’t you need something more concrete to get a warrant?”

Schultz nodded, sighing deeply. “It’s hard to imagine anything positive coming from Doctor King’s death, but a very sad little boy told Frank he knew about a gun deal—that was all we needed. That high-school boy also just gave him up.”

“I’ll be.”

“Yeah, justice wins out once in a while.” Schultz sighed again; they walked on, then stopped in the foyer. “Mister Greene, even if you still have doubts about teaching, I’ll make you an offer. How would you like to finish out the year in ninth grade with our top students?”

“Take Nash’s classes?”

“That’s right.”

“I appreciate it, but I’ll stay with my kids.”

After Schultz noticed the damp trousers, Allen told him an understated version of the gang incident. The principal said he should go home and take it easy, but Allen went out to the car, trying to think of what he could do to make himself more presentable at the hospital. He rifled through his crap in the Volvo's trunk and changed into an old white T-shirt he had thrown in there to use as a rag. Allen drove off with the windows down to let his pants dry in the warm air. He was glad to have the travel time to think about everything that had happened.

Although he didn't recall ever going to County General, he had no trouble finding it. It wasn't very far from his old junior high, about two-thirds of the way from Los Feliz to East L.A. He recognized the multi-story white towers at the front of the building—they must have used the old hospital repeatedly for cop shows and medical dramas.

Allen started to put on his Pirate windbreaker over the T-shirt, but it was too warm. Inside the main lobby, he found a cross-section of L.A. residents. Amidst the scores of blacks, Latinos and whites—most of them in work clothes—he saw two men in turbans, a lady in a sari, and an old couple wearing traditional dress he didn't recognize.

There was almost no chatter. A nearby man with detritus in the whiskers of his very long beard was curled up on a couch and seemed to be the only one who was not gloomily paying attention to the boxy TV on top of a tall steel cart. The news was reporting on the search for Doctor King's assassin.

Half listening to the TV, Allen walked over to a lady at the information

desk, who looked askance at his holey T-shirt and rumpled khakis before she agreed to find Sandra's room number for him. He heard the news report change to a commercial, then took the elevator up a few floors.

Allen got out and walked ahead toward an open-ended Plexiglas room, about twenty feet down the corridor, where several people waited, including Charmane. She was bouncing Melissa on her lap and talking to a gaunt woman in her late thirties. He saw Monique at the back of the area, chatting seriously with a young man in a white shift who was at least six-eight.

Before Allen was very close, Charmane handed off the baby to the woman, and then ran-limped up to her teacher. With both hands, she embraced one of his arms. "Mister Greene, you were right, Sandra's going to be okay."

He patted her clumsily on the back. "That's terrific, Charmane. What did they say?"

She squeezed his arm again, her dark brows hopping excitedly. Charmane took a breath, and her words came out rapid-fire: "At first they said she probably had to have an operation on an artery, but she didn't need it after all, just a lot of stitches. Her head is okay—a mild concussion, they said. She's sleeping right now and might get to go home in two days." She exhaled with a wide smile, let go of him, and hurried back to the baby. After handing Melissa over to Charmane, the woman walked away before Allen got there.

He softly tweaked Melissa's cheek; she reacted to him this time with a smile. Grinning back at the infant, Allen told Charmane that he was going to talk to Mrs. Morgan for a little while. He walked past a few disconsolate people, excusing himself as he went by. Allen approached the tall young man and Monique. They stood, her red hair well below his chin. "Mister Greene, this handsome gentleman is Charmane's brother."

She was exactly right about his appearance. He was in his late twenties with a slender chiseled look, and not as fair as his sister. The young man offered a hand and said, "Mister Greene," averting his eyes from Allen's unkempt wardrobe.

"A pleasure, I'm Allen." He unintentionally squeezed his hand too hard. "And your name?"

Monique cleared her throat. "My fault. I was trying *not* to say Miles. Let's see now, Faisal Muhammad. Right?"

"Correct, Mrs. Morgan."

She faced Allen. “Well, it looks like Charmane gave you all the latest on Sandra.”

“Yes, great news.” He turned back to Faisal, lowering his voice so as not to embarrass Charmane. “Your sister’s a remarkable girl. She’s an enthusiastic learner, and Sandra couldn’t have a more loyal friend.”

Faisal gave him a bland look. “We are very proud of her.”

After a brief awkward silence, Monique grinned at Allen. “Mister Greene, maybe you can spring for a cup of coffee for a tired old teacher.” She lifted the big purse over her shoulder.

“No, but I’ll buy *you* one.” Faisal ignored Allen’s joke and sat down. “Can we bring you something, Mister Muhammad?”

“No thank you.” He turned toward his sister, who was sharing a sip of soda from a can with Melissa.

“We’ll just be down by the vending machines at the end of the hall,” Monique told Faisal, who nodded, then respectfully stood up again as she and Allen left.

They walked slowly down the long spic-and-span corridor, not speaking until out of earshot from the waiting area. “Monique, was that Sandra’s mom? It seemed like she avoided me, but I’m not sure.”

“I think she’s hung over and desperate for a bracer. You’re not the first person she’s avoided. Charmane is upset because Mrs. Small waited so long to call Sandra’s aunt—she’s on her way back from San Diego.” They walked on. “What did you think of Charmane’s brother?”

“He seems, uh, pretty formal.”

“He was very serious even when he was with me—now he’s serious and angry, but still a fine young man.”

They came to a nursing station where a blonde nurse in a winged white hat was listening to a loud joke from a male staff member in plain blue scrubs. The short fair man paused to size up Allen and Monique, then continued his story, not as loud.

Allen heard *coon* in the punch line, stopped and scowled at their muffled horselaughs. “Jesus, what’s wrong with you pe—” Monique tugged Allen away like a child coaxing a reluctant parent. He heard them laugh again. “Assholes.”

“Yes, just forget them.” She shook her head dismally. They passed a

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stairway door and entered the last section of the corridor. She patted his arm and let go. "This morning I was listening to something on the radio about Doctor King that might perk you up a little."

"Good, let's hear it."

"You know that Buddhist master's material you gave me?"

"Thich Nhat Hanh."

"Yes, I still can't pronounce it."

Allen sighed, glancing back at the nursing station. "He'd be impressed with how I let those jerks get to me."

"That's not what I meant. Did you know that Doctor King nominated him last year for the Nobel Peace Prize?"

"What? Thich Nhat Hanh? I didn't know *anybody* nominated him. I don't even remember who won."

"There was no award the last two years."

"Figures, but it's great that Doctor King supported him. I'll check that out—thanks for telling me."

"You're welcome."

They neared the end of the hall. She grinned at his clothes. "Allen, how did you end up, um, so disheveled?"

He looked at her wryly. "There was more fun after you left." Allen heaved a long sigh.

"Tell me about it. I don't really want coffee."

They came to four unoccupied black leatherette chairs beneath a tall and wide picture window. Allen turned two of the chairs around so they could sit and face the glass. There hadn't been wind or rain in L.A. for many days; the unrelenting smog had settled below the inversion in a stubborn thick yellowish-grey layer.

It took him a few minutes to relate the main details of what happened at school, Monique breaking in for explanations. While he spoke quietly, Allen gazed down from their high vantage point at some tall old eucalyptus trees. The grove was similar to one at his junior high, only a few blocks away, where they would sit in the shade at lunch hour, tossing seedpods at each other. "... then after Ishimoto and Deniker left, I . . ."

While telling her about Nash's arrest, he stared up at a very small island of

clear blue at the center of the sky. Then he looked down at a man and woman greeting each other in a parking lot. He guessed they were saying, *At least it's another beautiful day.*

“. . . so that's about it. Cecil was quite the hero.” He told her that he declined Schultz's offer to take Nash's classes.

“Of course you did. My God, I knew Simon was a little off, but think of the damage he's done, and in so many ways. Maybe Miss Dorsey will run again for Alliance president.”

“They should be so lucky.”

“Yes, a ray of hope for the old place. Allen, what did you take away from Ronnie's willingness to stand up for you?”

“I'm grateful, of course. I just hope Frank and Sharon can help him get into school somewhere.” Allen shook his head a little, breathing deeply again. “Ronnie said something I won't forget for a while.”

“Go on.”

“After he told them to leave me alone, he said, ‘He's the teacher who says my poems are good.’”

“Well, there you have it, *chéri*.” She smiled. “I take it you've made a career decision.”

He nodded slightly. “Yeah, I'm going to give teaching a shot if Ishimoto doesn't get in my way.”

“She can't do anything except stop you from coming back to Marshall. You have Greg, Miss Dorsey, Sharon and me for references—and Frank.”

“Yeah, I think we're actually becoming friends.” In the distant waiting area, Sandra's mom was handing the baby to Charmane. “Monique, I have a gift for you, if you want it.”

“A gift? Allen, you don't realize how much you have given me already.”

He smiled. “I want you to have Pedro.”

“What? You can't just give him up.”

“I'll have to, and you'll love him just like my mom did. After Trudy's baby comes, she won't have time for him. I hope to travel some after that, then I'll probably go for my credential somewhere in the boonies. Pedro needs a stable home and some attention in his last years.”

“Yes, don't we all.” She paused. “Are you sure, *amour?*”

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“I am, but I also have an ulterior motive. Wherever you guys are, I’d like to visit—you, Sharon, and Pedro.”

She smiled through her tears. “Do you promise to do that, Allen?”

“Absolutely.”

She hooked her arm around his elbow, and they started down the hall together toward Charmane and Melissa.



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