

As the Slabs Burn

Zachary C. Wilkins

Department of English

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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_____ Mikhail lossel _____ Examiner

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Chapter 0

Stealing the Scout

Wymee was lying on her back, looking up at the circle of twilight in the ceiling. She had done it, she realized, she had built her dream home: a treehouse inside a tower, a floating bedroom suspended from a circular opening in the vaulted cathedral ceiling, high above the leftover markings of forgotten rituals. Outside was the desert.

The faint sound of a car engine drifted in, coming from the direction of the outlaw camp. She climbed up and stuck her head out through a porthole in the massive domed roof. In the distance, she could see the lights of Nyland coming on and a freight train heading westward along the sunset route. Alone to the south, the state penitentiary shone hard and sharp like a diamond. The car bounced gently over the cracked plain with its lights off. When it got to the road, it turned and continued towards her, till it arrived at the foot of the abandoned water tank and stopped. She peered down at it, narrowing her eyes against the setting sun. It took her a moment to recognize Tweaker Larry, looking up at her from behind the wheel.

She ducked back inside and descended the metal rungs, crossed under the cage, and exited the chamber through a hole busted in the side of the tank. At the bottom of the bluff, she walked over to the waiting car and nodded a greeting. Down here, everything was already in shadow.

Larry didn't get out. He was a small, grey man with day-old stubble and a permanent, tentative smile. "You want to help me pick up a car?" he asked, looking up at her through the open window.

"You're driving the Cougar," she observed, not answering the question. The Mercury Cougar with its peeling beige paint belonged to Larry's partner, Scary Sherry.

"Sherry's not feeling well," he said quietly.

Wymee already knew this. She had visited them the day before and noticed that they'd gone from eating Spam to straight up dog food. She had a feeling they might have eaten one of the dogs, but there were too many of the ragged mutts to tell if any were missing. Wymee didn't need to ask to know that if they were starving, they were probably also out of drugs.

"You're going to go pick up a car on the Slabs?" asked Wymee, addressing the matter at hand. "The Slabs" was what remained of an old army base, a relic from the past century spread out on the mesa above them. Over the years, generations of drifters had built camps on top of the base's concrete foundations, and it had been reborn as "Slab City."

Larry nodded. "It's a truck actually. A Scout. Been sitting there awhile," he reassured her.

This was good enough for Wymee. There were tools on the front seat, so she climbed in behind Larry. They drove up past the tank and onto the mesa. Camps began to appear, as they crept along an eroded lane. They saw a low fire burning unattended and a dim light inside an old motorhome, but no people; those who could had already left for the summer, going north to escape the dangerous heat. The Slabs ended at a wide, concrete canal and they turned and drove along it. Passing the library, Wymee saw a heavy branch lying across the roof. *Politics and Biography are getting fucked up*, she thought absently. To the left, the edge of the canal dropped steeply to the water on the far side of which a hedge of creosote bush marked the beginning of the open range. Behind them, the setting sun had turned the horizon a mottled pink-orange-black, like a Halloween candy.

Larry unexpectedly cut the wheel, and Wymee's stomach lurched as they veered away from the canal down the side of the embankment. At the bottom they bounced hard on the Cougar's dipping

shocks, then accelerated inland down a narrow road with dirt walls rising on both sides. Rounding a corner, they emerged onto a big, sandy lot hemmed in by dunes. The moon was rising, casting long shadows. At the far end of the lot was a single-wide trailer; the siding of the trailer had been ripped away, exposing pressboard panels that stuck out like bone, split and twisted. They coasted to a stop in front of the trailer and waited. A ghost-like figure appeared at the window then vanished; it looked like a woman, but Wymee couldn't be sure. Larry cut the engine and got out. She followed him and they walked past the trailer to a vehicle parked behind it. It was an antique International Scout, a boxy open-top truck. It looked to be in good shape, aside from one bent wheel and a couple of flat tires. They set to work. Larry opened the hood and checked the engine while Wymee worked at getting the bad wheel off. Each time she stomped down on the tire iron to break free one of the corroded wheel nuts, a shot-like screech rang out into the night. As the echoes receded, Larry suddenly began bantering, as though he were entertaining an invisible audience. Wymee listened as she replaced the wheel:

“That's right, she says. That good old boy at the gas station says he knows a thing or two, but he knows at least three if you count the fake name he gave you, plus the real name his mama gave him makes four – and he must know he's lying, so I guess that's five. Who's counting? Count with me now: Three, two, one, live from Slab City Sound studio in the Second-Bunker-from-the-Sun. You've read about him in the pages of Rolling Stone magazine. He's a little runner- sorry folks, I meant 'Here's a little number' for you all...”

Larry ranted like this every once in awhile and Wymee called it his “routine.” The first time she'd heard him do the “routine” they'd known each other a month, and he was showing her his crossbow. It had a yellow plastic stock and made a violent clacking sound when fired, sending steel bolts through a sheet of quarter-inch plywood. She took aim and pulled the trigger, and the sound acted like a starting pistol: Larry began strolling about, talking a mile a minute. That first time, she thought he was speaking pure gibberish, but over the two years she'd known him she'd begun to wonder. When

he did the routine, she'd begun noticing recurring names and pieces of interrelated stories; it was as though the whole thing were one long monologue broken up into segments. She suspected the routine was always running in some part of his mind, but never asked.

Larry chuckled confidently under the moonlight, pandering to a ghost audience seated around them in the dunes. "I'm *a runner, yes indeed, I'm a runner...*" he sang. He was missing teeth and had a crown of white hair, but moved easily, like a teenager. They inflated the Scout's tires with a bicycle pump, trading off every fifty reps, Larry's oversized t-shirt billowing up, revealing ripped, muscular definition. When the tires were inflated, he crawled under the front of the Scout and attached a heavy tow chain to its chassis.

They started back the way they'd come, with Wymee steering the Scout. The chain was short, and all she could see ahead of her was the reddish glow of the Cougar's taillights. Instead of following the canal road as expected, Larry turned west and began picking up speed over the downhill grade. Faster and faster they went, until without warning, the road ended and they hit the bed of a dried-out wash with a jolt. Wymee gripped the wheel harder and stared transfixed at the blur of terrain flying under the truck, trying to avoid rocks and steer clear of the canyon walls. Larry drove like a maniac. *He's a runner*, thought Wymee, *but he won't outrun me tonight*. The length of chain between the vehicles danced then smashed taut over and over, like it was struggling to break free. She grinned, feeling an ecstatic sense of place; there was nothing between her and the stars. She careened blindly down the ravine, dragged like a millstone towards the ocean floor.

Chapter 1

Never go to Town

"Are you a good listener?" Mike Bright asked in his gravelly New Mexico drawl, staring at her from his perch on the edge of the bed. The RV was filthy. Beer cans littered the floor around Wymee's feet, where she sat on a plastic cooler facing him, rolling a cigarette. A fly buzzed lazily from the window to land on Mike's arm. He waved it away. "Kids listen naturally," he continued. "They haven't learned not to pay attention—that comes later. The average fifth grader is a much better listener than an adult: do you think you're as good a listener as a fifth grader?"

Wymee's head remained bowed, her face hidden below the brim of a faded, army-green bucket hat. She licked the edge of the rolling paper, taking her time. "No idea," she replied, "but I am really good at ignoring people."

Mike considered this a moment, then shrugged. "Well, ignoring people is an important skill too, especially for a young woman. My oldest daughter would have been about your age, and—"

"Your daughter," Wymee interrupted, "died in a car crash, backpacking in Australia. You told me already. Her picture's in the drawer, there." She motioned with the lighter, then lit her smoke. From outside came the sound of a jet passing high above them; there had been drones over the range all morning.

"Christ," spat Mike. "If losing your child doesn't bear repeating, I don't know what does." His skinny arms rested in his lap, crossed at the wrist, fingernails streaked with

resin. They were a dull bronze in the morning light filtering through the blind from the desert outside. His sandalled feet hung limp, not quite reaching the floor. Wymee had on a pair of chucks, and her feet were planted firmly on the mottled, grey carpet.

"I'm a good listener," observed Wymee, passing him back his can of tobacco. "I don't need to hear the same story twice. Your daughter had red hair, am I right?" Wymee looked up, meeting Mike's eye. He raised a hand like he was going to say something, then let it fall again. The baseball game came quietly over the radio. Mike leaned across the bed and retrieved a soapstone pipe, scratched some hash into the bowl and took a puff. Then he passed it to Wymee.

"There's something wrong with you," he muttered, almost as though he were talking to himself. "There's something wrong with anybody who would walk away from all that money, like you say you did." He lay back on his elbows.

"What I said," she corrected him, "is that I have twelve grand coming my way at the end of the month. It's a deferred payment till the price of weed goes back up."

Mike snorted but said nothing. Wymee set the pipe down and leaned over to open the little propane fridge below the kitchen counter. It was empty save for a piece of tomato and a half-eaten chocolate pudding cup. She cut a slice off the tomato chunk, got another beer out of the cooler she'd been sitting on, and passed both unceremoniously to Mike. "Eat," she said, then took her leave. He was saying something as she stepped outside, but she closed the door and found herself alone in the bright morning stillness. Mike had parked his RV behind the stage, so that he could stumble outside come dark-

thirty, just in time for Range Night.

Wymee set off walking down the road, across Poverty Flats. As the name implied, the scenery was desolate, even for the desert. Most of the camps in this part of the Slabs were dingy-looking trailers, or ragged tents with coils of barbed wire around them. She passed Solar Mike's, with its broken solar panels ringing the perimeter of a cactus garden; it was better than some, but still looked more like a bunker than a home. The days were starting to cook and even the dogs were sticking to the shade.

When she got to Donny's, he'd just finished changing the oil on his old pickup. He saw Wymee, gave her a quick wave, then went inside to put on clean clothes. He didn't like being seen by her in his work clothes. Donny had been laid off at fifty and living in his Winnebago ever since, but he was always clean-shaven and his hair was always combed. He kept his camp equally tidy. While she waited for him to change, Wymee opened his toolbox and took out a folding saw, which she put into her backpack. Then she walked around the Winnebago to wait in the shade, looking out over the edge of the mesa.

Donny came back wearing a linen shirt and a pair of chinos, and they got in the truck. They were just pulling out when a wiry man in a pair of ragged black jeans jumped in front of them. Donny hit the brakes, and the man came around and climbed in next to Wymee.

"Jerry." She knew him though they weren't exactly friends. Nutty-brother Jerry was the self-proclaimed Sheriff of Slab City. He was perpetually shirtless and shoeless, and his skin was so deeply tanned and burnt that she'd once heard it described as "human

leather.”

"Darla's gone," said Jerry. Darla was his fiancée, a boisterous, glassy-eyed woman. She'd landed in the Slabs around New Year's, wearing a denim miniskirt that showed a lot of varicose leg, and stolen Jerry's heart. Donny and Wymee waited, half-expecting to hear what else she'd stolen, but all he said was, "She's gone, and I need to go to town to find her." He stared sullenly out through the windshield. They bumped and bounced along, pressed up against one another. The streets in the Slabs had been paved once, back when the base was new. There wasn't much left of the old asphalt now, after seventy years of sun and blowing sand.

"Never trust a crack whore," said Jerry sagely, as they descended the side of the mesa. "That's what Darla is, I know it. It doesn't change nothin'. I knew it from the moment I met her. And I knew that if I turned my back she'd be gone." He tilted his head in Wymee's direction. "She done it before." They were passing the guard shack. It had bullet holes in its concrete walls, and a big, green dick spray-painted on the side, with an arrow that pointed down a little road leading into the bushes. "This time is different," continued Jerry, "we're supposed to leave for Denver together. She's got a sister there who's supposed to help her take care of the baby." Wymee felt Donny shift and wondered if he was thinking the same thing she was: *a baby?* Jerry had to be in his sixties; he'd told her once that he'd been sent to 'Nam as a teenager for killing a cop. Wymee would have put Darla over forty, but it was hard to tell. They crossed the irrigation canal and drove alongside a field where labourers hunkered in rows, picking okra. They passed a storage yard where cars and boats sat baking behind a chain-link

fence, waiting for the day their leases would run out and they'd be auctioned off.

When they crossed the tracks, Jerry suddenly ordered them to turn left. Donny obeyed and they drove slowly along the town's periphery. The town of Nyland was just a handful of businesses and a few hundred homes, pushed up against the highway like a tumbleweed. Half the buildings were abandoned, and there was never anyone in the streets. There was a saying in the Slabs: "Never go to town." And if it wasn't always possible to avoid town completely, most Slabbers tried.

"There," said Jerry, pointing. They pulled over and he got out. They watched from the car as Jerry unlatched a gate and went up the dirt path to an abandoned-looking house. He climbed the steps and banged loudly on the door; waited, then banged again. He jumped down off the low stoop and pressed his eye up to the cracks between the boards covering the front window, trying to see inside. If there was anything in there, it kept still. Jerry disappeared around the side of the house.

"Fuck this," said Donny glancing in the rear view. "We sure as shit aren't waiting around here all day." But he made no move to leave. Finally, Jerry emerged from the other side of the house and walked back to the pickup. He looked unhappy.

They drove to the general store and while Donny bought groceries, Wymee picked up four packs of wieners, buns to match, and a case of Bush Light beer. The hot dogs were to sell at Range Night and the beer was for Mike Bright. At the register she made an executive decision and spent some of Mike's change on Hostess fruit pies: Lemon, Cherry, and Custard Cream. Maybe she would give one to Kyle, she mused, but which one?

She left the store and followed the covered walkway to the back, where they had parked next to the water spigot. Jerry had stayed with the truck and Wymee found him squatting in the shade against the stucco, staring absentmindedly at the hose that snaked its way into the tank. She put the perishables in the cooler, then joined him against the wall. After a moment, she sighed and offered him a fruit pie.

"Custard," he said gruffly. For the first time, she felt sorry for him.

Donny had just joined them, when a chromed-out Chevy Silverado with tinted windows drove into the lot behind the building. Immediately, Jerry got up and walked towards it, stepping carefully over the hard ground in his bare feet. He reached up and took hold of the side view mirror like he was steadying a horse. The driver's window went down, revealing a guy around thirty with a goatee and slicked back hair, wearing black sunglasses

"Geez," breathed Donny quietly, "looks like Mexican mafia." The guy was grinning at Jerry, Banda music and smoke floated out the window. Jerry stepped back and the truck started rolling again. The window was still down, and Wymee could see the driver smiling in the mirror, watching Jerry in amusement.

"Yeah 'I like you, Jerry'," Jerry mimicked sarcastically. He squatted—it was a movement that all dogs recognized in the Slabs, that of picking up a rock—but he didn't stand back up right away. Wymee thought he was bluffing, but then she saw him turning over different stones, checking their heft: he was looking for the right one. When he found it, the pickup had reached the other end of the lot. "How you like me now, you pimp cocksucker!" yelled Jerry. He threw the rock in a graceful arc. It plummeted into

the tailgate, cratering the shiny white panel with a bang, followed by the sound of cracking plastic as it popped back out. The truck turned the corner and disappeared.

Chapter 2

Hot Every Time

The man stopped at the edge of the asphalt and tried to put the Cadillac into four-wheel drive. After searching the dash for a few minutes, he looked in the glove box to see if there was a manual, but no such luck. The last thing he needed was to get stuck out here. He cursed and checked the GPS again, then put the SUV into drive.

The little road behind the guard shack didn't go far, just into some low brush at the edge of the trees, where it widened into a rutted parking lot, covered in tire marks. He turned the engine off and sat for a moment, looking at the steam rising over the edge of the low, dirt rise.

He got out and walked up to the edge. Below him was a large pool of steaming water. Bubbles rose steadily from its center, creating concentric rings that moved out in a gentle tide. The sides of the hot springs were eroded and steep, with scrub brush and a few small trees lining the top. There was no obvious way down, so he looked across to the far side of the pool where the oasis began in earnest and there through the trees, saw what appeared to be a carpeted area with some railroad ties set up as makeshift benches. He backed up and skirted the pool. When he got to the benches, he saw that there was a small pile of clothes on one of them.

"How's it going?"

The voice had come from nearby. The man stepped around the bench, looked down towards the edge of the hot springs and did double take: in the shallows where the

water flowed into the underbrush he saw a heathen sight, a young man covered in what appeared to be dried mud. From the far side of the hot springs, mudbather had been indistinguishable from the muddy bank itself. The man stared, not knowing what to say; he'd been warned about the people around here. "How's the temperature?" he asked finally, as casually as possible.

"So hot," came the answer.

"Hotter than usual?"

"It's always hot, every time."

The man wondered what could possess someone to cover themselves in mud, or for that matter sit in a muddy pool of boiling water in the middle of a desert afternoon. It probably wasn't worth thinking about, he decided. Better to just remember why he'd come. "I'm the project manager over at the shale gas extraction site," he began "about sixteen miles from here." He pointed into the desert, in the direction he thought the rig might be. "I'm checking all the waterways in the area. Do you mind if I take some pictures? Not pictures of you, of course, just for documentation." He had gotten his phone out and he waggled it as he spoke.

"It's a free country," said the heathen. He had pale blue eyes that stood out against the mud. Even his long hair was coated in clay and hung around his shoulders like snakes.

The man stepped forward a little and took a picture, angling the camera in an exaggerated way so it was clear he was only capturing the waterline. "So... do you come here often?" he asked.

"That depends. I try to make it two, three times a day, but sometimes... Life, you know?"

The man waited for him to say more, but that seemed to be it. "Okay, so pretty often then I'd say." He gave a forced laugh. "Have you noticed any changes in the temperature lately, any change in the water level, anything like that?"

"Nope."

The man noticed that one of the heathen's hands was sticking up out of the water, holding a paperback novel.

"Shale gas," repeated the heathen thoughtfully. "That's where you blow up the rock, right? So, are you worried that it's going to drain the hot springs or something?"

The man laughed, a little harder this time. "No, nothing like that." He shook his head and took another picture, this time of the runoff, with its low trail of steam disappearing into the bush. "Everything we do is controlled; we just extract the oil that's already down there. We operate so deep underground that it could never disrupt any local waterways, nothing like that. I'm just taking pictures for documentation; it's not for the job."

"Hey, you know what?" the blue eyes had lit up.

"What's that?" asked the man.

"My friend Tecalote told me that the Mojave runs over the fault line: we're right above the San Andreas fault. Isn't that crazy? We're below sea level, in an earthquake zone, and every day the army bombs the desert all around here. They've been bombing it

for half a century! Over there"—the heathen pointed excitedly with his book—"there's about twenty freight trains that roll across every day. You can feel the vibrations shaking the ground. And now you're telling me that there are explosions going off *underground*?" He seemed fascinated "It's like a story from the bible. Well not the old bible because there's no bombs back then, but you know? Like a new bible," he concluded happily.

The man laughed uncertainly, shaking his head from side to side. "Well, I think I see what you're getting at, but what we do really isn't an explosion. It's a chemical process that produces pressure and a controlled fracturing of specific layers of rock. What you're talking about is an act of God." He raised his palms indicating whose hands it was in—not his.

"I believe in God."

"That's good," answered the man automatically.

"Or is it?" countered the heathen, wide-eyed.

Donny and Wymee waited nervously for the water tank to fill up, expecting the white pickup to return and some sort of bloody revenge scenario to unfold. Jerry seemed to have forgotten the whole episode immediately and sat against the wall, brooding. When the tank was full, they drove slowly out of town. No one said anything until they slowed at the guard shack. Jerry got out and continued on foot up towards the Slabs. He looked preoccupied, stepping quickly in his bare feet over the hot asphalt. "Just as well," said Donny, as they went down the little dirt road towards the hot springs, water sloshing around in the tank behind them. "He'd be like a wet rat in the hot springs—a wet desert

rat." At the empty parking area, they stopped and got out. Kyle's bike was lying next to a bush, its trailer attached. In the distance, an Osprey helicopter hovered low over the range, gauzy sheets of dust billowing up from beneath it.

"You going in?" asked Wymee.

"Me? Oh no..." Donny looked thoughtful. "In this heat I'd be asking for a heart attack. I've had enough of those to last me a lifetime." He had shown Wymee the lump in his chest, where they'd put in the pacemaker.

They walked around the pool towards the benches and when they rounded the trees, Kyle was standing on the carpet letting himself air dry, completely naked with his eyes closed. His skin was clean and pink from scrubbing the mud off, and he was combing his strawberry locks with his fingers. He had his head to one side, like he was trying to hear the sunshine. Wymee greeted him and Donny just stared.

"Hey Wymee, hey Eagle D—I got something for you." Kyle picked his jeans up off the bench and started looking through the pockets.

"Eagle D'? That's a new one," said Wymee, looking to Donny for confirmation. He was staring at Kyle spellbound and didn't seem to have heard her.

"Yeah," he said finally, "when the new kids found out my name was Donny the Eagle, they shortened it to Eagle D. Kyle." He shook his head, marvelling. "You've still got a beautiful dick, kid."

Wymee thought she saw Kyle falter a little and she pretended to wipe her brow in order to hide a grin.

"Thanks, Donny." Kyle smiled mildly. "I had a buffalo nickel for you, but I guess I lost it. You going in the water?" he asked Wymee as he began to get dressed. His tie-dye shirt was so faded and thin that the designs looked like purplish sweat stains.

Wymee hesitated. "You know, I think I'll skip it. I told Mike Bright I'd help him sell hot dogs at Range Night, and I want to go up to the Lizard Tree first." She felt like she was babbling and blushed a little.

"Hey, you better swim while you can," replied Kyle. "There was a guy here earlier who said there might be an act of God one of these days."

Donny scoffed. Kyle pulled on his sneakers, and the three of them walked back towards the parking lot. "Donny," asked Wymee, "do you mind hanging on to those hot dogs for me or dropping them at Mike's? I can come by your place later." She avoided looking at him.

"Sure thing, kid." He got in the truck and started the engine. "I'll take that beer over to him; I saw him yesterday, he's looking terrible. Makes me glad I stopped drinking."

Kyle came up next to them on his bike. "Donny," he asked, "are you still down to drive me to the bus station Tuesday?"

"No problem." He began to back the truck out, then stopped and stuck his head out the window. "Hey kid." He looked troubled. "If you're going all the way into the city just to sell your body, you know I'd be happy to pay you fifty bucks to give you a blow job."

"No, Donny." Kyle shook his head gently. "It's part of a purification ritual."

"Well, I love you, kid," replied Donny. "I love all you kids." And with that he drove off.

Chapter 3

Tank Road

Kyle and Wymee started across the open plain, walking along an old water line. Here and there, the pipe had cracked and broken, causing cave-ins that revealed dark tunnels and chunks of green ceramic from a bygone era. Behind them was the oasis: the hot springs were at one end and the outlaw camp at the other. Behind it, a line of greenery stretched out along an irrigation canal, eventually disappearing into a distant lemon grove. In front of them, the mesa stretched up like a curtain, long grooves cut into its face by the rain that fell once a year, gushing in muddy torrents. On the left side of the mesa was Leonard's mountain, a life's work of religious devotion. Leonard had seen the light and dutifully spent the rest of his life transforming an entire hillside into a frenzied honeycomb of straw- bale caves, the entire thing covered in a massive bible verse through the application of untold gallons of paint. On the right side of the mesa was the tank, a monolithic concrete structure sporting a crown of barbed wire and covered in graffiti. Someone had dangled on a rope three stories above the ground to write the word "JUMP" in big block letters up near the top, in hot pink.

When they got to the tank, they climbed the dirt path up the hole in its side. Wymee unlocked the door, an actual car door, and went inside to get her bike. Then they headed up onto the Slabs. The noonday sun was beating down as they pedalled slowly along Tank road. This far out there weren't many camps. They passed a tarped-up Land Rover which had been sitting alone and untouched for months. Whoever owned it, other

Slabbers knew they would return. Soon, they were passing the pet cemetery.

"I was in there the other day," Kyle began "and I saw something pretty fucked up. There was a cross that had the N-word on it."

"Knowledge?" asked Wymee.

"Huh?" Kyle didn't get it. "No, you know, the 'N' word."

"Yeah, that is fucked up." Wymee thought for a moment. "Did it look kind of new?"

Kyle nodded.

"Well then it's probably Insane Wayne's dog. It must have died after he did." Kyle looked puzzled and Wymee explained. "It was a corgi and it was black. Insane Wayne always called it 'Blacky' or... that other word. It's a terrible name for a dog."

"Or is it?" asked Kyle with slow wonder.

"Yeah, it is, Kyle—or for anything else." Wymee had known Kyle a week and she'd gotten used to his habit of ending every other sentence with a question, but she still couldn't decide if he was joking, or meant it rhetorically, or what.

"That's really racist," decided Kyle. "Was Insane Wayne a racist?"

Wymee considered. "He was definitely evil. I only met him a couple times, but he had that hatchet face, you know? Like he'd been doing bad things his whole life. He said one time someone stole his dog, but two days later they brought it back because it had such a bad attitude, just like its daddy. He was a decent guitar player. You ever hear that song, *The Roadkill Gourmet*?"

He hadn't heard it. "Eagle D had a dog. He fed it McDonald's every day," said Kyle changing the subject.

"I heard that one too," said Wymee.

Kyle's camp was down in the wash, just off the Slabs. He lived in a treed area with his friend Chris, and Tecalote, "The Owl," whom they'd met on Venice Beach and who claimed to be a shaman. He'd told Kyle and Chris about the Slabs and convinced them to bring him out here on some sort of mystical goose-chase. Wymee didn't think he seemed particularly enlightened for a bum, but she kept her opinions to herself. The boys were fascinated by him.

Wymee followed Kyle as he rode down the hill into the wash, expecting him to skid his bike into camp. The day before, she'd been there when Chris had skidded in, sending sand into Kyle's ramen and almost putting out the cook fire. But instead of skidding, Kyle simply swerved and stopped. Wymee pulled up next to him.

"Wow," said Kyle admiringly, staring at a giant hole that had been excavated in the clearing. It was big enough to bury a car. Across from it, Chris sat with his back to a tree, smoking a cigarette. "Did you dig that?" asked Kyle, pointing needlessly to the hole.

Chris nodded and held out a box of crackers. He had closely cropped brown hair and light brown skin; his shorts were salt-stained, his shirt was off, and covering his chest was a crudely drawn tattoo of a scene from The Simpsons. There were two plastic grocery bags full of canned goods lying in the shade, next to the tent.

"Is it for the ceremony?" asked Kyle, still staring at the hole.

Chris shrugged. "Tecalote came out," he said. "You have to go see him."

They sat and had a cracker, then Kyle followed Wymee up the wash, commenting repeatedly on what a “nice hole” Chris had dug. Wymee had her own ideas about the hole. *Can a tweaker always recognize another tweaker?* she wondered. At Low Road they parted ways. She watched Kyle continue towards the big tree, where atonal flute music floated out from Tecalote's tent. Then she turned and headed towards the library.

Chapter 4

That's Not How You Do It

In a stand of tall trees next to the canal stood the Lizard Tree Library. It had started out as a single shade structure, but over the years the yard had been fenced in, a table and hammock had appeared, and the number of books continued to grow. There were shelves and shelves of books organized by section in a series of ramshackle sheds, connected overhead by boards and palm fronds; carpeted lanes led all through the aisles. At the front entrance a greying peace sign held a picture and brief eulogy to Jane, the Lizard Tree's long-time custodian. There was a new librarian now, not exactly Jane's spiritual successor. His name was Hit-and-run Bob. At Jane's passing he had pulled his big, airstream trailer around from the far side of the dune; he'd set up right next to the library fence, from where he peered angrily between the shutters at all visitors.

Wymee dismounted at the gate, walked into the yard and leaned her bike against a picnic table. She looked through a box of recent donations, but it was all big hardcover American history and James Michener. She sighed and looked up at the broken branch lying across the roof. It was heavy, and the roof was beginning to cave under its weight. She pulled the saw out of her backpack and started up the tree.

The door of the Airstream flew open, and out came a man wearing a greasy blond hairpiece, pinned to the sides of his head by a pair of reading glasses. He was tall and scrawny with a gut that looked like he'd stuffed a pillow under his t-shirt. "And just what do you think you're doing young lady?" he asked sarcastically.

Wymee hoisted herself up into the crotch of the tree, next to the offending branch. "Your job, I guess." She smiled and unfolded the saw.

The sight of the toothy blade made Bob hesitate. He stood for a moment without saying anything, regaining his composure only to lose it more severely. "Now, I wouldn't mess with that," he said, red in the face. "That branch'll break off clean on its own, so long as no idiot comes fartin' around with it in the meantime." He waited for a response, but Wymee had begun sawing. Finally, he said he hoped she broke her neck then went back into his trailer.

Once the branch was down, she debated briefly what to do about the roof. In the end, she left it for another time. It had taken her twenty minutes to saw through the ironwood, and she was sweating like crazy. She came down out of the tree, grabbed her things and headed out the back gate that led towards the canal.

She walked along till she was out of sight of the library, then stripped down to her underwear. The current was strong and the canal narrow, with ladders descending to the water every few hundred yards. Wymee climbed down, eased her body into the cool water, and was immediately swept sideways. She swam hard for the opposite side, caught the bottom rung of the next ladder, and hung on. She was closer to the drop now, where the water passed through a sluice gate under a low bridge. A colony of swallows fluttered in and out, their nests like beehives made of mud. Wymee could see something splashing in the water on the far side of the drop. It looked like an animal of some kind. She swam back across, caught the next ladder and climbed out of the canal.

Once she had her clothes on, she walked quickly back to the drop and crossed the

bridge. On the far side stood a boy about thirteen or fourteen, staring down into the water. He had blond, almost white hair that covered his ears and the nape of his neck, and he was tall for his age. His arms were disproportionately small, but apparently functional: in them, he held a makeshift fishing rod. From the end of a broomstick, a piece of taut fishing line descended into the roiling waters at the base of the drop, where it was tied around the neck of a desperately struggling puppy. The dog was trying vainly to climb the steep, slippery wall, as the current tugged it downstream, strangling it against the line which the boy held firm. He was so absorbed in his task that he didn't notice Wymee until she was beside him, pulling the line up. He didn't react, just stood and watched as she brought the dog up over the edge. She took a knife from her belt, knelt and carefully worked the blade between the fishing line and the puppy's wet fur. There were bloody abrasions on the dog's neck, and deep welts were the line had been. It lay panting and shuddering fearfully till it had recovered enough to drag itself into a nearby bush.

"That's a bad thing to do," Wymee enunciated carefully.

The boy was defiant. "I was just seeing if he could swim. I was fishing. You cut my line."

"And you're lucky I did." She felt anger rise within her but controlled herself. "Whoever taught you to fish didn't teach you right: that's not how you do it. What are you trying to catch here anyway, catfish?" She waited for the boy to understand the joke.

"Bass," he said tentatively, "but they're not biting."

"Well, you should try further down, away from the drops where the water is calmer." Wymee had no idea if this was how to catch fish in the canal. "Find yourself a

shady spot where the water is calm and there are bugs over the water. Look for the bugs."

It sounded reasonable enough.

The boy was listening carefully, seemingly having forgotten all about the dog. Wymee began to walk downstream, back towards the Slabs, and the boy followed along after her.

"Do you like to fish?" he asked hopefully.

"Sure," said Wymee. "I won a fishing rod when I was about your age, biggest catch of the summer in my age category."

"What was it?" he asked, mesmerized.

"I can't remember, just a fishing rod, nothing too fancy."

"No," he said suspiciously. "The fish. What was the fish you caught?"

"Sixteen-inch rainbow trout." They had reached the next drop, where Tank road passed over the canal. Wymee turned down it, heading back into the Slabs. The boy stood watching her from the bridge.

Chapter 5

Bus Kenny

Bus Kenny had built his camp on the former mess hall foundation, the second biggest slab after The Range if you didn't count the empty, Olympic-size swimming pool better known as the skatepark. Wymee felt a twinge of pride as she approached the tall shade structure; black netting was stretched between full-sized phone poles to cover half the slab. Last year Kenny had paid Wymee to put those poles up for him. She'd busted through six inches of concrete with nothing but a breaker bar, and dug five feet of clay beneath that, with a spade and tin can.

All three dogs went crazy when she called out her arrival. She had to push them off the fence before she could get into the compound. Over the barking she heard Kenny yelling at them to shut up. There were buses all over the place; two of them were pulled up at one end of the slab, forming a wall. Wymee passed between them, ducked under the netting, and followed a hall of stacked lumber that opened into a big, cluttered living room. Diffuse light fell through the netting above. To one side was a workshop table with projects in various stages of completion or abandon. Shelves full of tools and paraphernalia lined the walls, and a huge Turkish carpet covered the concrete floor, tying the room together. In the center sat Kenny in an old claw-foot bathtub, a can of Natural Ice beer in one hand and a half-smoked joint in the other. He looked pleased to see her.

"You look like you're doing alright," she said, raising an eyebrow.

Kenny grinned. It was almost comical how filthy he was, his blackened head and shoulders protruded from the tub like he'd just lit an exploding cigar. He wore taped-up, black-framed glasses and his teeth were smeared black too; his curly blue-black hair with grey coming in at the sides had been finger-combed. According to Kenny, the tub was strictly a way to fend off the heat and deal with the pain from an old motorcycle accident. The injury had shattered his hip and left him with a bad limp.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Kenny's voice was naturally rich, but it wavered uncertainly much of the time. "Did somebody say something about me?"

Wymee sat down on the bench across from the tub and stroked VeeVee's muzzle along the scars which were her namesake. Kenny wanted his dogs to be fierce, but he fed them too well for that: she'd seen them gather at the bus door at meal time, wagging their entire backsides along with their tails. Kenny fed them beans, and he made great beans, with cocoa powder and roasted poblano peppers.

"It's my own observation. I haven't seen you out of that tub all week. You sleeping in that thing, Kenny?" Wymee kept her tone light.

He sighed. "Yeah, it has been a bit of a bumpy road lately." He frowned and adjusted his glasses. "I've just finally had it with these people around here. It's always 'Oh Kenny, can I borrow this,' or 'Kenny, can I get some tobacco,' and they're all a bunch of god damn leeches. I shouldn't even get into it, but you reminded me—" He pointed with the joint to something on the shelf next to her. "You see that black pouch? Yeah, that one."

Wymee took down a black, nylon utility pouch with zippered pockets. She held it

out to him, but he waved at her to keep it.

"It was Aggie's. She left all her stuff here when she went off with that asshole. And you know, at first I tried not to blame him, but I do blame him: drinking in hundred-degree heat all day with no water or food, she was only about a hundred-and-ten pounds to begin with." A hint of melancholy crept into his voice, then vanished again. "You notice that somehow *he's* still around though, that little prick."

Wymee didn't say anything. Veevee nudged her fingers, but she ignored her.

"Anyway, all Aggie's stuff is still here. I have to get rid of it and I was thinking maybe you'd like that pouch. It goes with your colour palette." He gestured at Wymee, up and down to include her faded black jeans and t-shirt. She unzipped the pouch: inside was a bicycle patch kit and what looked like business cards.

"Sure, I'll take it," she agreed immediately. She didn't want to get into another discussion about Agneszca, the dead Polish girl. Kenny never could resist a woman with a hard luck story, and "Aggie" had been the latest. It had started with the purest of intentions, as it always did. He'd let her live in one of his buses to try and help her get her life together. Predictably, he'd fallen in love with her, and just as predictably, she'd walked all over him. The women Kenny took in were always a mess, and he never seemed to catch on to the fact that that was why they had been in distress in the first place. With Agneszca things had ended particularly poorly. Wymee had already heard all about it from Kenny and others: it tended to be a bit more of an event when younger people died. She became aware of machine gun fire in the distance and wondered vaguely if she'd been hearing it all afternoon without noticing. She shook herself. "Let's

get down to business Kenny." She got the hash out of her backpack and broke it in half. "One hundred percent pure finger hash," she announced, handing Kenny a piece the size and colour of a chunk of chocolate.

He held it up and adjusted his glasses "How much you want for that?"

"Twenty is good."

He nodded, pleased, then leaned out of the tub and rummaged in a dark green ammo box on the ground next to him. He pulled out money and Wymee took it, then he pulled out a pink slip and waved it proudly in her direction.

"This is what I really wanted to tell you about. Got a new bus," he said with the sly grin that meant he was starting a new project. Kenny loved to start projects, especially if they involved buses. He had rebuilt, lived, and travelled all over in buses, mostly International Harvesters, like the refurbished 1955 school bus that was next to them, hidden under the shelving and kitchen equipment built up around it. He'd bought it from the forest service and arrived in the Slabs driving it, pulled it up onto the slab and built outwards, like an insect acting out some instinctual behavioral imperative.

"Yah, this new one is beauuutiful." Kenny drew out the word in admiration.

"International Scout in good condition. Perfect for the push-me-pull-me design I told you about."

Wymee didn't remember, but it was good to see Kenny feeling enthusiastic again.

"Yah, yah, yah," Kenny repeated happily, "it's a '69 Scout. Thought it was a '68 till I got the paperwork."

A connection began forming in Wymee's mind, but the smile stayed on her face.

"A Scout? Open top, looks like a Jeep?" she asked.

Kenny was happy to see her so interested. "Well, yeah. It's got the same short wheelbase as a Jeep or a Bronco, convertible with a couple rows of bench seats.

"And where is it exactly?" Wymee looked out into the yard hopefully.

"I was going to ask you about that. It's been sitting awhile, needs a couple tires. I thought we could go get it tomorrow and tow it back here."

"Where is it?" Wymee asked again.

"Not far. It's out past the library. It belonged to some old boy out there, but he's gone, and I guess Mama Carol got his camp and all his stuff somehow, you know how these things go. Should be easy to get it rolling and tow it back here. I'll pay fifteen, twenty bucks if it takes longer. Lunch is included, as always. I have to get some stuff in Brawley, I thought we could go to that little Mexican place, Rosa's—"

Wymee interrupted him. "The Scout's not over there, Kenny."

He adjusted his glasses. "I was there yesterday afternoon to get the title from Carol. It's all squared away," he explained carefully.

"It's not there Kenny."

He stared at her quizzically, still thinking she might be joking. "Well it better be there," he said sitting up in the tub "I've got the title and a receipt for five hundred dollars cash, signed and delivered by Downy."

Fuck. This was bad news. Downy wasn't a Slabber, but he was always around, somewhere within easy reach of things. His big, late-model pickup was always rolling

away from the sketchiest camps or drifting along the canal road without a speck of dust on it. Wymee had seen him talking to Larry once. He'd driven off as she walked up, but not before she'd seen his face: he had a demon's features tattooed over his own in sooty black lines. He even had the horns.

Kenny was getting worked up. "It damn well better be there. People think this place is a god- damn free-for-all, but I'm not playing games: I've got the title and I'll call the cops." He shook the pink slip.

Wymee remained calm "Listen," she said. "It might take a day or two, but I'll bring your truck over— and it's still gonna cost you twenty." She said it as casually as possible.

Kenny stared at her, trying to read her expression. "All right," he said finally "but if it's not here, there's gonna be hell to pay."

Chapter 6

Eagles

Donny the Eagle was waiting for James and there was nothing left to do. The chicken and dumplings were cooking in the pot, the brownies were in the oven, and the rooster was fed. He sat at the kitchen table, turning a blown glass, eagle-shaped pipe over in his hands. Donny loved eagles, and the inside of his motorhome was decked out with them. There were two in flight over the sink, their airbrushed wings unfurled across an artisanal plate; there was an eagle travel mug on the table in the breakfast nook, and an eagle calendar on the wall above it; a golden eagle statuette presided over the orange-carpeted dash, and in the back bedroom, a laser-engraved crystal-quartz plaque featured the prized bird. The bedsheets, throw cushions, and towels in the bathroom were of course all eagled. The pipe in his hands was just a decoration. He'd given up smoking weed a year ago, after waking up in the dark three nights in a row, unable to breathe. He shuddered at the memory. He'd been a smoker for fifty years and had been resigned to smoking and drinking himself to death, even after four heart attacks, but the choking had got him to quit smoking. It was the kids that had got him to stop drinking.

Donnie loved kids. He was never happier than when he was feeding a crowd of hippies; he would feed them every day if he could, then sit by the fire and bang arrhythmically on one of their drums. He'd done just that for a whole summer in Quartzite till he ended up broke, and the kids had baptized him Donny the Eagle. Two years ago, he'd wound up in the Slabs, and pretty soon he was feeding kids here too. One

afternoon he'd had a big group over for lunch, Wymee among them. The awning that extended from the motorhome had gotten stuck as he tried to retract it, and she'd volunteered to go up on the roof and have a look. Donnie was too drunk to go himself, but he stood below giving orders, trying to explain that there was a trick to it. He'd lost his temper and yelled at her—and her reply had made him ashamed of himself. Now he sat at the table fingering the pipe, trying to recall just what she had said to him that day.

Footfalls outside in the sand brought him out of his reverie. A moment later the door opened. "James! Come in young man." Donny's melancholy left him at the sight of the boy. James climbed the carpeted stairs and sat down at the table, as Donny got up and busied himself at the stove. "You hungry kid? Chicken and dumplings on tonight's menu. Sorry, no bread and butter. May's was all out and I ain't driving all the way to Brawley for a loaf of Wonder bread." Donny was talking cheerfully, taking the pot out of the oven. He looked over his shoulder and saw a can of Orange Crush on the table and frowned. "Where'd you get that, James? No soda till after supper, remember?"

James shrugged, reached out with one of his bird-like arms and gave the can a half turn. "I don't know, it was on the tailgate of your truck outside."

Donnie's heartbeat quickened and he turned reflexively to look out the window, scanning the yard and environs.

When Wymee got to Donny's, she was still thinking about how she was going to get the Scout back, but she forgot all about it when she opened the door and saw James sitting at the table, looking down the stairs at her. She stepped inside and closed the door,

then sat on the bench behind the passenger seat. There was a sheaf of paper stacked haphazardly in front of James. Only the topmost was visible, it was a drawing of what looked like a fish with arms and legs.

Donny was at the sink, wearing an apron and doing the dishes. "Wymee, meet James," he beamed. "James, meet Wymee."

"We've met," she said. James looked at her uncertainly. "But it's nice to meet you again." She held out her hand. He took it and gave it an abrupt shake.

"Really?" Donny was surprised "Where'd you two meet?"

"We met fishing," replied James. "Earlier, on the canal." Donny looked at Wymee for confirmation and she nodded.

"Well young man, you better listen to her"

"Why's that?" asked James, looking slightly alarmed.

"*Why's that!?*" Donny's indignance was good-natured "Because you might learn a thing or two.

And if you don't, she might straighten yer ass out." Donny craned his neck as he said this, implying untold vicissitudes "Excuse my language," he remembered to say.

James looked back and forth between Donny and Wymee "You want to go fishing with me sometime?" he asked tentatively.

"Sure," she said.

"James, could you please go outside and feed the rooster?" asked Donny "Do you remember how we did it yesterday? One cup from the big white bucket, and water."

James picked up a coloured pencil and started doodling.

"Hop to it, young man, or there'll be no more brownies for you," insisted Donny.

When James left, Donny slid the back window shut. "Red's getting supper twice tonight" he muttered. Then he sat down and looked seriously at Wymee "He's the one I told you about, I think he's being abused. He said there was a can of soda on the tailgate when he came home earlier, and that's one of the things he told me the guy gives him as a reward: he told me the guy gives him soda as a treat to go over to his place. I think he's trying to lure him back," Donny explained. "So far, James likes it better here, 'cause I let him do whatever he wants. Hell, I let him drive the truck around the tree earlier and he just about went into the wash." Donny grinned, then grew serious again "I can just tell something's not right. When I was his age, there was a friend of my parents who would come over and watch us kids when they went out drinking. He used to buy me packs of cigarettes and all sorts of crap. He used to let me drive his car too, and I tore that shit up: he got to fuck me, but I bet he needed a new transmission in that Chevy when I was done with it." He laughed bitterly. Wymee could see James out the window, standing with his back to them, leaning into the chicken coop. "I can just tell," continued Donny, "and I think his grandma and his dad are a part of it. I think there's something really bad going on. James told me last night that they let him go down to Mexico with that guy. They were alone for a week—" The door opened and Donny stopped talking as James came up the stairs.

"I think Red is angry with me," said James. "He won't eat."

"Red loves you," Donny assured him, "he's just shy. Well, we better get you home

now." James started to protest, but Donny cut him off. "C'mon James, you know what your dad said. If you want to be able to come back here again, you need to do what your dad tells you to do."

James looked sour but began collecting his drawings. He turned to Wymee suddenly and asked her again about going fishing.

"Still yes," she said.

Over the boy's head, Donny mouthed the words "thank you."

Chapter 7

Range Night

Her name was Carol but they called her Mama Carol. She wasn't a mother; the appellation was just a leftover from the world of bikers and burnt out hippies from whence she came, and where she'd left most of her teeth. She still had one or two at the far back of her mouth, and they flashed as she screamed and laughed, dancing around the oil drum fire under the stars. Flames shot out the top of the barrel and engulfed the lumber, sending chemical fumes and smoke up into the night; pinpoints of light shone out the sides, through bullet holes that kept the fire breathing.

A tall guy with a droopy blonde moustache was dancing with Carol, they waltzed across the slab pawing each other, oblivious to the people dancing around them. Below a wide bandana, his eyes rolled like a horse. She was wearing a stiff leather bustier, jeans and flip flops, and the boyfriend had one hand stuck at her thick midriff, jammed through the lacing more trapped than fondling. Her eyes were dilated and black, her hair was parted on the side and pulled back in a bun. She was solidly built, but her face was wizened, like something out of feudal times.

Seeing her cackle in the firelight with an arm thrown around her mulleted pikeman—it was a mediaeval scene from where Wymee stood watching, under the dusty frond-awning of the hot dog stand. She'd heard Carol was a prostitute. “Mike,” she asked, as she reached under the counter to retrieve a fresh bag of buns, “does Carol sell her ass?” Mike Bright was perched on a rickety bar stool next to her, contemplating the ground. In

the dim hue of the patio lanterns, all that showed of his face was a yellow-whiskered chin, the rest was hidden under the brim of an old baseball cap. Legs crossed debonairly at the knee, one hand pensively stroking his beard. He was sometimes called “The Professor,” which pleased him doubly, since he liked to think of himself not only as a “knower-of-stuff,” but also as a social castaway. From Wymee's vantage, he looked unhealthy and frail. He had worked as a house framer most of his life, building adobes in New Mexico, but now his thin legs floated like a child's in his cargo shorts and his sandals looked almost too heavy for him.

Without raising his head, he answered her in an ugly tone of advanced drunkenness. His words lacked their usual, belligerent charm. “Of all the words in the English language,” he began his lecture, “you never cease to discourage me with the crudeness of your diction. I suppose that's to be expected in this... this fine... *establishment*.” He spat the last word out, as though disappointed not to have come up with some lower order of descriptor, then gave a quick bark that took in the entirety of the Range: the musicians on stage, the people dancing, and those seated or milling about in the shadows. He sighed “The short answer to your question – not that it really merits any answer at all – is that Carol is a force of nature. You can't 'buy' a Carol, and 'sell' is a concept I wouldn't imagine she has much use for either. Hell, she has very little use for anything you might call a concept.” Mike paused and nodded to himself, warming to his subject and regaining some of his good humour. “She's been around though, our Carol, and in her own terribly damaged way I don't think much could shock her, unless it were something really unheard of – like kindness, or some other sign of basic goodness on the part of civil society – some really unusual thing like that.” He wagged a hand limply,

dismissing such whimsical notions. “No,” he paused dramatically, “the fact is, she's more likely to rape your ass.”

The music trailed off in a series of inexpert bass plonks and one or two distracted cheers from the crowd. A couple of girls about Wymee's age, obvious tourists, began clapping and cheering for a clean-cut guy as he climbed on stage with a fancy-looking guitar. Wymee saw Carol look in the direction of the hot dog stand, then barge towards it, knocking the tourist girls out of the way without even noticing them. *Maybe letting people think they're paying for sex is just easier than robbing and raping them*, thought Wymee distractedly.

“Hey Mike!” screamed Carol happily, striding up to the counter. Mike nodded faintly. “Carol.”

“Gimme two hotdogs with ketchup and onions. Babe,” she yelled over her shoulder. “You want a hotdog? Waddaya want on 'em?” He didn't want any.

“That'll be three dollars,” said Mike. Carol reached out and stuck the bills under his nose. As he took the money he paused, looking down at the big shiny ring on her finger. “Cubic zirconia,” he enunciated.

“Wazzat?” she countered. Then seeing that he was eyeing her ring, she broke into an even bigger smile. “I got it from Gary.” She threw a careless jab over her shoulder in the direction of the dance floor. “Gary,” who had come up behind her, narrowly missed being punched in the eye. She dangled the ring under the bill of Mike's baseball cap, splaying her fingers wide.

“Why, that's lovely Carol,” said Mike raising his head a little. “It really brings out

the swell of your bosom.” Carol looked pleased and began to laugh, but Gary leaned heavily over the counter and shook his fist in Mike's face.

"NOBODY talks to my lady like that!" he bellowed. "I'll tear your fuckin' head off!" The nearby crowd fell silent. Nobody knew Gary. He looked mean and not too bright. Wymee inventoried possible things to hit him with, but there wasn't much at hand.

Mike seemed to awaken to the intransigence of his predicament. "I do apologize," he said carefully to the fist, "for speaking in such a coarse and unrefined manner to your voluptuous lady." Gary wavered, trying to parse what he'd just heard. Mike turned back towards Carol as though the whole thing had been resolved. "Now, Carol"—he spoke across the counter in a business-like manner—"would you like your buns toasted?"

Carol hesitated only a second. "Sure, Mike." Gary withdrew his fist and the crowd turned back to its business, which consisted of drinking and smoking around the oil drum fire or lounging on the old bus seats spread out auditorium-style in front of the stage. Wymee got out two buns for the dogs. When she turned to give them to Kyle who was working the Coleman, she found him standing right behind her, barbecue skewer held tightly at his side, no doubt ready to use it on Gary. He was wearing a purple chef's toque that he'd found under the counter. She smiled inwardly and passed him the buns, then she sat back down.

Towards the end of the night, the crowd began to thin out. Mike was fumbling with the Velcro flap of his cargo shorts, trying to get at a plastic mickey of Ancient Age whiskey. Wymee heard him muttering, as though to himself. "Wymee? *Why-me?* You're

trying to tell me that's what your mum and dad named you? They mighta been thinking it, but '*Why-me?*' isn't a name. More like a condition."

A man brought a scorpion in a jar over to the hot dog stand, asking Mike to settle an argument about how poisonous it was likely to be. Without ceremony, Mike stuck his hand in the jar and grabbed the translucent green arachnid. Wymee watched in disbelief as the scorpion stung viciously, digging its barbed tail into his index finger. "Now observe," said Mike, and put the creature into his mouth. He chewed quietly and wouldn't acknowledge the general consternation his actions had produced. However, once things had settled down and the man had gone away empty-jarred, he leaned over and murmured with ill-concealed pride, "How many guys you know eat a live scorpion?" His boyish pride and idiotic grin made her laugh outright, and for a moment she wanted to tell him about the Scout. But just then, Carol came storming back onto the slab from out of the dark. She was alone and there was no sign of Gary.

"You fucking *steal? From me?*" She raged, oblivious of the remaining Slabbers. No one approached her or asked who she was talking about. "When Downy gets here," she prophesied darkly, "that motherfucker's getting put in the sky."

Chapter 8

Sounds

The Range had emptied out, only Builder Bill remained on the stage, putting everything away until next week. Kyle was standing in front of the slab, giving the tourists directions to the hot springs. They had two cars, and the girls Wymee had noticed earlier were sitting in the back with the door open, laughing at everything Kyle said, and flashing their big white teeth.

"Why don't you just hop in there Kyle? I'm sure they can make room for you on their knees," said Wymee, trying not to let her irritation show.

"I have to get my bike," he said simply. Kyle had left his bike and cart on the far side of the mesa earlier in the evening, gathering sage with Tecalote. Wymee had already agreed to go with him, though it was by no means a shortcut to the hot springs.

The cars drove off to the sounds of muffled house music, just as Bill cut the power to the patio lanterns and stage lights. Kyle and Wymee found themselves in the dark and began to walk. It was unusually cloudy for this time of year, and they couldn't make out even the ruts and potholes in the road. When they got to the wash, they descended carefully, feeling their way.

"You know what I'd hate right now," said Kyle "is to step on a rattler."

"That would suck," she agreed, "but you're more likely to step on one on the road this time of night." The asphalt retained the day's heat, and snakes liked to stretch out on it as the temperature dropped. Whenever she biked after dark, Wymee would pedal hard

then lift her feet up onto the top bar and coast. If she did run over a snake, she wanted her legs to be as far out of fang-range as possible, in case of a death lunge. "Is there actually sage down here?" she asked, changing the subject. They were still descending the wash.

"Tecalote says there is, but we didn't find any today. I think we'll find some tomorrow though. He spent a lot of time in Death Valley after Vietnam. He knows so much about the desert."

Wymee couldn't decide which of the claims sounded less likely. "He was in Vietnam?" she asked finally.

"Yeah, he was an Army Ranger. Those guys get all kinds of additional training, survival stuff."

Wymee thought briefly of her own basic training. Only the orienteering exercises could really be considered survival skills, although digging latrines might count, considering how many people didn't seem to know enough not to foul their own water supply. "It's strange," she said, "the number of bums I meet who claim to have been Army Rangers. I must have met at least five in the Slabs. I'm pretty sure Jerry said he was one too." She pictured Jerry that morning, looking coolly for the right throwing stone and thought, *Well maybe*.

"You think they're lying?" Kyle sounded incredulous.

"I didn't say that. I just wouldn't be surprised if they were all big fans of *The Deerhunter*. It's a movie about Vietnam," she added.

"Okay," said Kyle. "But Tecalote—" he didn't finish. They were well below Poverty Flats now, out of sight of the camps. The road was far to their left, around the

side of the mesa, but an engine had suddenly revved nearby. A vehicle was coming their way and would soon pass below them. The only people who drove off-road at night, or even by day for the most part, were outlaws and border patrol. Even cops wouldn't pursue a car chase into the desert.

Wymee sat down on a boulder, leaning into the hillside. The motor grew loud as the vehicle moved into view, revving to keep from bogging down; only its running lights were on and it looked like a Chevrolet pattern, though it was hard to tell. The truck continued a short distance and stopped, too far to make out anything but the momentary glow of the dome light, but close enough to hear the doors slam. A voice rose up, sounding angry. Someone else yelled, then immediately fell silent. A third voice spoke, just a murmur compared to the first two. Then the first voice again, threatening. Only the occasional word was discernible, but the tone was clear enough: "... *motherfucker...kill you...*"

"We should do something," said Kyle in a low voice. "Tecalote says we are all Shantasina."

Wymee didn't know what he was talking about. "Sit," she commanded. The voices had stopped. Suddenly one very unhappy voice rose up, followed by a quick succession of pops. The first voice yelled some more.

"We should go over there," said Kyle anxiously. Wymee took his wrist and held it firmly. "Kyle," she said, "that would just make two more bodies in the desert."

The engine started and the vehicle moved on, away from the road. They sat listening for a long time, even after they could no longer hear it.

Chapter 9

The Floater

The tourist cars were parked in front of the hot springs when Kyle and Wymee rolled up. They could hear laughter as they circled round to the benches. "Hi guys," Kyle called out a bit weakly, as he and Wymee got undressed. It was tricky in the dark, not to get their clothes mixed up with someone else's. Wymee put hers in her backpack, then hung it in a bush.

"Hi, 'Kyle'," called out a girl, followed by laughter. The moon was showing through the clouds, reflecting off the water. Wymee thought there were about ten people lined up along the banks in the shallows. She jumped in at the deep end, avoiding the tourists altogether.

The water was scalding, but she adjusted to it quickly, floating on her back with her ears submerged. The clouds had blown over and she gazed at the stars above, tricking herself with the sensation that there was no up or down. She treaded water and listened to the conversation for a bit. They didn't sound so bad. She made her way over to the shallows, but stopped short of the others, relaxing into the bank with her knees up, feeling the clay squeeze between her toes.

"Hey. Wymee, is it?" asked a voice. For some reason, she was sure it was the guy with the fancy guitar speaking.

"Yeah," she responded. Everyone stopped talking, realizing her presence for the first time.

"Hi, I'm Scott. Kyle says that you've been out here for a while, that you built the cage in the tank?"

"That's my camp," she confirmed. There was a pause.

"Well, we came by there today. I hope that's okay. We just stuck our heads in, we didn't touch anything."

"It's really cool from an architectural perspective," interjected another male voice. "I would have made it out of teak or some other hardwood, then it would be like a..." He tried to tell her what it would be like.

"How long did it take you?" asked Scott.

Wymee thought about it "Maybe a month for the cage, three weeks for the tire dome. Scavenging all the materials and hauling them back took a long time. Sometimes I had to stop until I could find the right piece."

There were some murmurs of appreciation. Scott spoke again "We're from San Diego. We came out here to honour one of our friends. I was telling Kyle, maybe you heard?" Wymee didn't say anything and he continued. "Our friend Jason passed away from leukaemia recently. He asked us to celebrate his life by getting together out here and donating money to Leonard at Salvation Mountain."

"That's cool," said Wymee. "Leonard will be stoked."

"Yeah, he was. We went over there today. He was really nice."

"How much did you give him?" asked Wymee.

"It was ten thousand dollars," replied Scott.

"Well, that'll buy some paint," Wymee said evenly. "Did your friend Jason know Leonard?"

Scott sounded sad. "Jason came out here at New Year's once, I think he met Leonard then. More than anything, I think he just wanted us to come and experience this place." His friends made small, supportive sounds.

"Well, it's appropriate anyway," said Wymee. "Some people say this place is an elephant graveyard." There was an awkward silence.

"What does that mean exactly?" asked one of the girls.

"It's where old elephants go to die."

The same girl spoke again. "So are you saying that a lot of people come here to die? Or that a lot of people die here? It kind of makes a difference."

"Or does it?" asked Kyle. He paused. "There was a guy who died right here in the hot springs last week."

"What happened?" someone asked squeamishly.

"Oh, he was floating in here for a few hours, then they fished him out—last Friday night," said Kyle simply.

Wymee smiled in the dark. "That's funny," she said. "I came in on the train Friday evening and started walking out here. I could see flashing lights; the paramedics drove past me on their way out. I'd been away for a while," she explained, "and I'd been dreaming of the hot springs for months. It was dark when I got out here, which was lucky."

"Why's that?" asked Scott.

"Well, I had some peanut butter sandwiches with me and I was sitting in here eating them." She paused for effect. "My mouth was dry and my water bottle was up with my clothes, so I figured I'd just drink out of the springs."

"So, so gross," said someone, while others groaned.

"The water's fine, the heat kills all the microorganisms," insisted Wymee, "but it was the macro I was worried about. Sometimes there's stuff floating in here, an old Band-Aid or something and it was too dark to tell. Once I found out there'd been a floater in here right before me, I was glad I didn't take a drink. It was dark, about like tonight."

"Yeah," said Kyle, carrying on the same topic, "there was a girl who died in the tank not too long ago. My friend Chris was with her." Wymee felt the atmosphere shift, the tourists' discomfort was palpable.

"Who was she?" asked Scott seriously.

Kyle didn't seem to have noticed the change. "She used to work in an art gallery in San Francisco, she was Polish. She drank too much. Chris thought she was just hung over, but then she died of exposure."

"Dehydration," translated Wymee. "Well, I think I'm about done here." She stood up and made her way out of the water.

Wymee was getting her clothes out of her backpack when she felt someone standing behind her. "Kyle?" She wasn't shy about being naked, but it did make her feel

vulnerable, especially the bare feet.

"You know, it doesn't get any better than this," he said. She could hear in his voice that he was looking up, and she looked up too. There was a warm breeze. In the sky, clouds moved quickly across the stars. "Except maybe if I had something to smoke," he added.

Ask and ye shall receive, thought Wymee. She felt in her backpack and retrieved the chunk of hash, then she found Kyle's hand in the dark. He let her take it, and without a word she placed the hash in his palm and closed his fingers around it.

They said goodnight to the tourists and biked across the cracked mud flats towards the tank, following the same route as they had that morning. When they got there, they both got off their bikes.

"You want to come in and hang out for a bit?" she asked nervously. Kyle didn't respond right away. She took his hand and brought it up under her shirt, then she wrapped her arm around his neck and kissed him. His hand remained motionless, cupping her breast. She reached down and put her hand between his legs, kissing him harder. She unzipped his pants and reached inside.

He stepped away abruptly, pulling his hand out from under her shirt "I feel really funny," he said.

Wymee made a sound somewhere between a snort and a laugh.

"No, I mean I feel really weird: like I'm high or something"

"But you didn't smoke yet, did you? I was with you the whole time." It was hard to concentrate, she felt impatient.

"I don't have anything to smoke," he said, bewildered.

"I gave you that hash, remember?"

"What? Earlier... that was hash!? Oh no..." He looked back across the flats in the direction of the hot springs. "I ate that."

"You ate it?" she repeated dumbly "Why?"

"I just thought you were giving me a treat of some sort, like a snack."

"But you had just said you wanted something to smoke... Didn't it taste funny?"

"I just thought it was vegan or something. Oh fuck, it was hash?"

"Like fifteen grams of hash, yeah." Wymee was thinking straight again. "You should really make yourself puke, purge it right away," she urged him.

"I really have to get back to camp," said Kyle excitedly. "Tecalote needs to be here for this." He picked up his bike.

"Kyle," said Wymee seriously "you need to puke that up before you digest it all. It's mellow hash, but taking that much internally might make you really, really sick. Don't go anywhere." He was already rushing his bike up the hill towards Tank road.

"It's okay," he shouted over his shoulder, his voice booming in the open desert. "This is a good thing."

Or is it, thought Wymee, as she watched him disappear onto the mesa.

Chapter 10

Outlaws

Wymee was alone. The tank loomed on the hillside next to her, drained of colour in the moonlight. She imagined what it must have been like for the Polish girl who had been slow-cooked inside it, too drunk and weak to escape as her body evaporated over days, dying with excruciating precision till she was only a husk stuck to the floor. Why hadn't Chris helped her? Wymee looked down at the sandy square of black shag-carpet beneath her feet, once a dance floor, now just garbage in the desert. Kenny had told Wymee that she and Aggie were a lot alike, but Wymee hoped it wasn't true. Romantic fatalism was something you could get away with under a bridge or in a doorway, but not out here: out here fatalism was fatal. She looked across the plain toward the oasis; there were no lights visible in the outlaw camp.

She got on her bike and started across the plain. When she was close enough to distinguish the soft glow of LEDs, she dismounted and continued on foot. Then the dogs spotted her. First one, then a dozen mutts stood up from the berms, shattering the stillness with their snarls and barking. More came running around the side of the trailer, and a few crawled out from underneath it, charging madly at the intruder. Wymee kept walking, and the pack encircled her in a violent cacophony. A Doberman mix with a damaged throat rasped at her, showing its teeth. She acknowledged the pack with a word, but they carried on barking. "ENOUGH!" she commanded. They were mangy and their ribs showed through patches of missing fur; she couldn't tell them apart and wondered if they

remembered her.

As she came around the end of the trailer, she could feel Sherry watching her. Wymee spoke a low greeting towards the darkened window. On the other side of the trailer, a string of dim, white Christmas lights was tacked over the door. A wooden palette lay in front of it, and a man reclined in the dirt alongside it, elbow propped up on its edge. He had on an American flag baseball cap, camouflage pants, and a pair of reflective wrap-around sunglasses. Larry was sitting by the door, cradling a delaminated acoustic guitar. He looked up and the dogs stopped barking.

"Hi, Larry, Sherry—" Wymee raised her eyebrows in the direction of the screen door. In the dark interior she sensed movement.

"Yeah, she's in there. Not feeling so well." Larry turned a tuning peg and the copper-wound string emitted a tiny crescendo. "I put on the strings you gave me," he said. "The E and the G. I changed the D, something's not right with it." He continued turning the peg.

"That's good." Wymee remained standing. "I need to talk to you about that Scout." She glanced at the man lying on the ground. He hadn't moved, but she recognized him now. She'd met him in town once and he'd told her where to find a bike, the same one she had now. He was middle-aged, with the extra weight and flat demeanour of the heavily medicated.

"That's Mike," said Larry.

Wymee nodded "The thing about that Scout," she pressed on " is that Bus Kenny has the title for it. He showed it to me today, bill of sale too. He says he bought it from

Downy."

Larry clucked his tongue.

She continued. "He got pretty excited when he found out it was gone. Said he would call the cops." She felt bad repeating Kenny's threat, but wanted all the cards on the table. "I didn't tell him anything. He said he'd pay twenty bucks for towing it to his slab. You know the one." Most assuredly he knew.

"People are always walking away with things." Larry spoke softly, in a quick, halting way that suggested his thoughts came quicker than they could be put into words. "I leave a tool lying around here, somebody just walks by and *ffuit*—off it goes." He made a whistling sound. "When I found that Scout I thought things were starting to turn around." The guitar string unwound, like a cartoon sound effect. "I have a load of brass stuck up on the range. Truck broke down." Larry collected metal from the bombing range to sell at the scrap yard. Wymee had gone on a few missions with him; she knew it was a harsh environment for both people and vehicles. "I had a sock in the radiator but I ran out of water." Larry chuckled as though it were some private joke. She'd seen him make engines run in ways they were never designed to and wouldn't for long. "We were going to take the Scout up there and Mike was going to drive the GMC back." Mike was as good as asleep behind the distorted still-life reflection of his sunglasses.

Wymee considered her options. "You got it running," she acquiesced. "I'll help you get the brass. We can drop the Scout at Kenny's on the way back."

Larry cocked his ear towards the screen door, leaned the guitar against the wall, and went inside. He was gone for several hours. When he re-emerged, Wymee was

reclining next to the palette. She had joined the dogs in their suspended animation, folded herself into Mike's mirrored tableau; time had stopped like a game of musical chairs, with Wymee in the outlaw camp.

Chapter 11

Brass

It was still dark when they walked to where the Scout was parked, back under the palms next to a sinking shack. Larry had a couple of spare tires and a water cooler already loaded in the back seat, and Mike wedged himself in next to them. They drove with the lights off, Wymee sitting up front with Larry as he took them out of the oasis past the darkened camps, past the hot springs, and onto the road. They drove up onto the mesa and passed quickly through the Slabs, crossing over the canal on the bridge where Wymee had met James the previous day.

They were on the bombing range now, crossing a wide stretch of open desert, and it was paramount that they make it to the foothills before first light, when their dust would become visible for miles around. ICE patrolled the area looking for people smugglers but didn't go into the mountains unless they were recovering bodies. Larry opened up the throttle and the Scout skimmed over the washboarded road, arcing past low brush and dry ravines. Without warning, the hood flew up in front the windshield. Larry didn't slow down. Wymee scrambled out of her seat and climbed onto the front of the speeding vehicle, stomping the hood back down and bracing her leg against it. *This is it*, she thought exaltedly. It was like racing along on the prow of a ship. The sky was rapidly passing from black to grey and undulations in the sand were beginning to show in the predawn. The Chocolate mountains rose up before them.

Once they reached the first rocky outcroppings, they stopped and secured the

hood with a piece of wire, then quickly went on. The sun hadn't yet come over the peaks, but the temperature was beginning to rise. They climbed a sandy valley, following a trail of tire marks. The further they went, the more ubiquitous was the destruction: there was more than half a century's garbage spread all through the Chocolates, from decades of mortar and aerial bombing. War games had left shredded parachute cloth hanging from the spiny Chola cactus; there were flare canisters, munitions boxes, and comm wire spooled out across the hillside; there were shell casings, bombs and craters in all shapes and sizes. There was unexploded ordinance, great rusted missiles with crumpled noses, sometimes planted comically upright in the sand; the buried ones were more worrisome, thousand-pounders or little cluster bombs embedded in the dirt, all waiting to be driven over or stepped on. The Scout was built to travel over such terrain, and after an hour, they reached the place where Larry had left the GMC. He had concealed it behind the remains of a treaded personnel carrier, but it had been found, evidently.

"Beat me to it," said Larry, looking at the empty truck bed. "Must have been Dually Bob." He was looking down at the telltale double-tire marks in the sand. He knelt and retrieved a fifty-mil machine gun shell from the sand. It was tarnished black. He put his hands on his head, still holding the shell, and stood like that for several minutes. "Well," he said at last, "lose a load, find a load. I'm a brasser, time to go brassing."

While Larry tinkered with the GMC's radiator, Wymee and Mike transferred the spare tires and cooler into the back. Without a word, Mike climbed in with the gear and sat down with his against the cab. Leaving the Scout behind, they went deeper into the mountains, gathering brass. Larry drove with his door propped open so he could watch

the ground, until he bashed and twisted it against a canyon wall. He pried it the rest of the way off but kept his leg in the door-propping position out of habit.

At a heavily bombed target area, they got out and explored on foot, using the bottom halves of their t-shirts to carry shells, travelling back to the truck to dump them when their shirts were too full. Around noon, Wymee came back to find the other two already there.

"A hundred and ten," said Larry, peering at a thermometer, "but this thing doesn't work over a hundred and ten." Mike was very red under his cap and glasses and his armpits were soaked with sweat. He climbed into the back and pulled a piece of cardboard over himself for shade.

They followed a road that led up the side of a cliff. As they were climbing, the truck began to fill with bees.

"They're looking for water," said Larry "It's okay so long as you don't crush 'em." He took off his shirt and Wymee followed suit. She could feel the bees exploring her and she wondered if they could drink her sweat, or if it was too salty. When they got to the top of the plateau, the bees flew away.

They worked all afternoon and continued after dark, looking for the telltale gleam of brass in the moonlight. Larry had brought a can of corn and a couple of slices of bread. He gave Wymee a slice and offered Mike one as well, which he refused. The leaky radiator required regular topping-up, and they were almost out of water. At dawn, they descended into a narrow valley with target areas at both ends.

"They were hitting that end a few weeks ago," considered Larry. From the Slabs,

he kept watch over the range through binoculars, keeping track of where the brass was piling up, and where the bombing was too intense to travel. "It's been quiet this week." He shrugged and drove towards the far end.

They parked as close to the target as they could and got out. The area was utterly devastated. There were craters within craters. On a low hill stood the target, a white pole like a cane for the blind. Wymee began making her way towards it. She had almost reached the top when she heard it, a sound like lava flowing. She knew what it was at once, though her mind rebelled against the knowledge. She began stumbling down the hillside with some incomplete thought of making it to the truck, and saw Larry running in the same direction.

Then the fighter jet came over the ridge at the end of the valley and was upon her with a speed that made everything futile. In a deafening roar, Wymee looked up and saw the familiar shape of a grey F-18 hanging just above her. It was so close, she could see the sun glinting off the black tinted canopy. The wing was dipped, and in that fraction of a second, she felt the pilot looking back at her, deciding whether or not to blow up the hillside she was standing on. There was no fear. It was too loud and too fast to feel like anything but fate. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered if that's how it had been in Afghanistan.

Chapter 12

Walking Out

The jet was an omen; it was time to go. Larry drove perilously fast between rocks and bushes, trying not to bog down in the soft sand. They had to stop and dig their way out several times, lying under the truck, scooping sand with their hands. Digging out the truck was tiring and demoralizing, and the day was heating up again as the sun climbed higher. Mike was shaky and agitated and had begun grumbling to himself. Sometime around noon they made it back to the Scout and pulled up next to it.

"You better drive it," said Larry. Mike lay unmoving in the back, his legs in their camo pants sticking out from under the piece of cardboard.

Wymee moved over to the other vehicle. She drove ahead with Larry following behind her. After half an hour he had dropped out of sight. There was no use in stopping, she would likely bog down if she did, and have to dig herself out. She kept going, but soon the engine sputtered and quit.

As she sat in the hot car waiting for the others to catch up, she closed her eyes. She hadn't slept or eaten in two days, she'd been burning energy and drinking very little water. Her mind began to drift, and she shook herself. She got out and listened, looking back the way she'd come, but the mountains were quiet. She waited another half hour, then got her backpack from the passenger seat and started walking. When she reached the mountain's edge an hour later, there was still no sign of the others. The Mojave lay spread out before her like a map, as far as she could see, the canal curving across the plain in the

distance, like the bottom of a horseshoe. The Slabs were more or less straight ahead, but there was no marked or direct route. Once she was down out of the foothills, she'd have nothing but her sense of direction to guide her: if she strayed and missed the canal, she'd be lost.

Wymee trekked across the plain, trying to maintain a straight line even as she detoured around mesquite and creosote bush. Some of the washes were too wide to go around, and she had to go down into them and climb up the other side. There was a growing buzzing in her ears which she recognized as the curtain-call for consciousness itself. She ignored it and tried to think typical death-march thoughts. Regrets, loved ones, that type of thing. She remembered part of a conversation with her grandmother about the sin of premarital sex, but the walking itself occupied her mind and there were no other revelations. After several hours, she stopped and took out an empty yogourt container from her backpack. She squatted over it and peed. She had heard that urine's high salinity could cause cramps, but she was so dehydrated and parched that wetness of any kind had become irresistible. It was like drinking sea water, and the buzzing receded a little. She kept walking, the soft sand leaching her energy with each step. It got dark without her noticing. She could no longer see even the outlines of the dunes and knew that all she could do now was keep going. In the dark, she began to sense that the trees had grown larger, and all at once she came out on the canal road. The sudden presence of so much moving water seemed somewhat miraculous, but she felt too weak and it was too dark to descend one of the ladders. She looked around and saw a metal watering trough, installed for the deer and other wildlife who couldn't get down to the canal. She splashed her face and neck and drank slowly. After a few minutes she began to regain her senses. She knew

she must be somewhere near the Slabs but didn't recognize her surroundings. She started walking along the canal in the direction of the current. *That's me*, she thought. *Go with the flow*. After five minutes, she crossed a narrow lane leading to a camp set back in the trees. She could see what looked like a small cabin, and a trailer parked in front of it. She started up the lane and called out a greeting.

A woman came out of the trailer. "What do you want?" she asked sharply. She wore a checked shirt and ankle-length dress. "John! get out here," she called, turning her head towards the cabin without taking her eyes off Wymee.

"My car broke down up on the range," Wymee explained. "Can you tell me which way to Slab City?" her voice sounded weak and warbly in her ears. While she was talking, a man with a bushy beard and long hair had come to the door of the cabin. A moment later, James appeared behind him. Wymee was too tired to register surprise. "James," she said. "Hi."

The old woman shot her a suspicion-filled look. "James, you know this girl?" She sounded almost threatening. James hesitated.

"She's Donny's friend," he said. "We talked about fishing."

Donny's name seemed to catch the woman off-guard, but she recovered quickly. "What's your name," she asked with less overt hostility.

"Wymee," croaked Wymee.

"John," ordered the woman, "call Donny and tell him to come get his friend." She showed Wymee to a chair in front of an unlit fire pit, then went into the cabin. She came back out with a can of Sprite and a box of cheese-flavoured Ritz crackers, which Wymee

gratefully accepted. James had been standing by, watching intently. "He's my grandson, John's his dad," explained the woman. The man sat down next to Wymee without looking at her. A moment later, she felt a sharp pain in her finger and pulled it up quickly. A large black crow jumped back and stared at her.

"Watch out for Jake," said the man. He articulated very carefully and spoke in a low, even voice. "He's protective of me. I found him after he was winged by a car. He can fly now, but he chooses to stay." Jake flapped onto a low tree branch and continued staring at Wymee.

"Did you train him?" she asked warily. Jake hadn't broken the skin, but she didn't like him.

"I have an IQ of one hundred and sixty-four," he replied. "Above one hundred is exceptional; one hundred and fifty and above is considered genius." No reply seemed necessary. "Donny's on his way over," added John. "It's three-and-a-half miles to the Slabs from here. He's picking you up."

Donny was long in arriving, and James asked if he could show Wymee the small cabin. His father and grandmother conferred with a look, then they all went in together. There was a solar panel on the roof, and inside, an electric bulb shone overhead. James showed her a shelf with some school exercise books on it and said he'd be starting school soon.

"Where will you go to school?" asked Wymee.

James looked uncertain. "I teach him," filled in John. James showed her a small television and pulled some movies from underneath it. He seemed unsure whether to

hand them over or not. His dad took them from him and handed one to Wymee. "I'm an actor," he said. Wymee looked at the cover in her hands. It was a documentary about the life of Charles Manson. She turned it over. "That's me," said John pointing out his name. "They said I could meet him to prepare for the role."

"Manson? And did you?" asked Wymee.

John looked surprised. "No way." He shook his head.

James was excited, he wanted to watch the movie. There was no place for them to sit, so they stood waiting while John connected the movie player. He was still trying to get it to work when they heard a car pull up outside. James' grandmother peeked out briefly, and came back in, satisfied that it was Donny. John kept trying different ways of connecting the cables and his mother began impatiently suggesting how to do it. While they bickered, James asked Wymee if she had been fishing.

"No such luck," she replied. "What did you do today?"

A gloomy look came over James' face, but then he perked back up. "I'll show you my guitar!"

Panels of Gyproc had been put up to make a small bedroom at the back of the cabin and James pushed aside the towel that served as a door. She could see him digging under the bed; he came back out with his guitar. Because of his small arms, he had to hold it high on his chest. He strummed it fiercely and tunelessly, stopping every so often to reposition his fingers in what appeared to be completely arbitrary ways. Donny stuck his head in at the door.

"Hi everybody, hi James. Sorry to rush in and out, but I have corned beef on the stove, and I have to get back." Wymee thanked her hosts and left without seeing the movie.

Once they were on the canal road, Donny pulled a CD out of his shorts and put it on the dash. "I got into the trailer just now. Grandma's husband is in there, they keep him on tranquilizers and live off his disability check. He doesn't even know about her boyfriend."

"Her boyfriend?" echoed Wymee, but Donny was talking nervously and kept going.

"I've been wanting a chance to snoop around, I thought there'd be something. I think I found it."

Wymee picked up the disc. It was a blank CD-R with a Fuji logo on it. Someone had written "Mexicali pics, feb." with a felt tip pen. She thought of Larry still out on the range, and asked Donny to take her down to the oasis.

Chapter 13

Bologna on White

Donny left Wymee at the guard shack and from there she walked over to the outlaw camp. When she arrived, the lights were off and there was no sign of the dogs. The door opened and Sherry stepped out.

"Car broke down," Wymee began. She heard herself speaking but felt like it was coming from somewhere else.

"I know," said Sherry. Her pale face and long white braid were wraithlike in the dark. "He called me. I'm going to pick him up at drop seven."

They took the Mercury and headed back up onto the mesa. When they crossed the canal, Sherry stopped the car and waited. After a minute, Larry emerged from the shadows. He nodded to Wymee like he'd been expecting her.

"The pickup overheated about a mile back from where you broke down," he explained "I waited till dark. Made it all the way to the landing strip on two tires before I ran out of gas." The landing strip was just a few miles away. Wymee had watched it being dive-bombed by drones on her birthday.

Larry climbed in and they floated along, sliding around the curves. Sherry had told her that she used to run moonshine across state lines. *Did she tell me that?* All of a sudden, Wymee wasn't sure of anything; her mind felt thick. She hadn't slept in almost

three days, and time seemed to jump back and forth, the night interminable one moment, dawn imminent the next.

At the landing strip, Sherry parked alongside the pickup and Larry siphoned a litre or two of gas over from the Cougar. Wymee climbed in with him, and they started back. She saw Larry smiling as he sped along, following Sherry's taillights. Behind them, the brass shook an unceasing staccato.

"Where's Mike?"

Larry looked perplexed. "He got angry after the truck overheated." She could barely hear him over the sound of the engine. "He said he was walking back to Nyland. He was in bad shape."

"The Scout ran out of gas."

"I saw that."

Back at the oasis, there was still no sign of the dogs. Wymee helped Larry load the shells into five-gallon pails, then put them in the trunk of Sherry's car with a blanket over top. Larry kept an eye on the clock. When the sun came up, he and Wymee headed into town and her mind cleared a bit from the adrenaline: the shells in the trunk, like everything else that came off the range, were stolen federal property and if they were stopped, they'd be going to jail.

The junkman was unlocking his gate when they arrived and he waved them into the yard. Larry drove to the back and pulled into an open bay. The brass was quickly

weighed, then Larry went into the office.

He came back out and they left, but instead of driving back to the Slabs, he took a right and drove along the edge of town. He pulled over and parked. "Better not stay here," he muttered. "Police see you sitting in the car, they'll come talk to you."

She got out and followed him under the low limbs of a tree, down the side of a windowless building. In the backyard was a fifth wheel trailer. Larry knocked on the door and it was opened part way by a man with shoulder-length grey hair, a moustache, and a cowboy hat.

"Hi, Judd, me and Wymee here," Larry announced. They went in and closed the door. Larry sat down on the couch and Wymee followed him. Judd sat down opposite them, behind a folding table. He was wearing a fringed rawhide vest with turquoise beads, and he was missing his right arm. There was a box on the table, which he began to unpack, taking out scales and bags. In the kitchenette behind him, Darla was making a sandwich.

"You want Miracle Whip, Judd?" she cooed. She prepared his bologna on white with great care, asking if he wanted the crusts cut off, how he wanted it sliced, and whether he wanted his pickle on the side with the chips. When she brought it over, she beamed a radiant "Hi" at Larry that took in Wymee as well, but showed no further interest in them.

"So how are things with you, Larry?" enquired Judd as he put away the money Larry had given him and began weighing out the crystal.

"She's not feeling so well these days." Larry shook his head. As they chatted, the

conversation was interrupted at regular intervals by quiet knocks on the door. Each time, Judd got up and either spoke briefly to the visitor or invited them in. Those that came in sat down peaceably on the couch. Finally, Judd handed Larry a ziplock bag and said to give Sherry his regards. There were three customers waiting outside when Larry and Wymee took their leave.

Back in the car, Larry counted out two hundred and forty dollars and handed it to Wymee. Then he held out a yellowed methamphetamine rock.

"You go ahead," she said. Larry eyed her carefully then pulled out a glass pipe.

"You know," he said, "sometimes you can feel the pressure. I used to wonder about the people living in this town, the Nylanders. I wondered what they were doing inside, in the middle of the day. I started going into their houses to have a look, and you know what they're doing? They're sleeping. They have smiles on their faces." He flicked his lighter.

Chapter 14

Crossbow

Back at the tank, Wymee ate a peanut butter sandwich and smoked a cigarette, then went up to see Bus Kenny. She didn't know what she was going to say to him, only that she needed to say something. But when she got to his camp and called out from the fence, there was no reply. She could hear the dogs barking, going crazy inside the bus. She peered towards the shade structure trying to catch a glimpse of the tub. Finally, she got on her bike and left.

She found herself biking towards Dually Bob's. He lived close by and had a carport set up next to his trailer where people hung out, mostly tweakers. Wymee had been there a few times. When she got there, the carport was closed up, its dirty nylon flaps blocking out the morning sun.

She was pedalling slowly, looking at the carport when it happened: there wasn't a lot to suggest that she'd been shot at with a crossbow, just a ripping sound and motion in the leaves next to her head, and the distinct, percussive clacking from somewhere close by. She registered the event and kept going as though nothing had happened, rolling down the road without looking back.

When she got to the Kyle's, he wasn't there. Chris was sitting against the tree smoking with his shirt off, just like before. This time however, he had soot marks on his chest and forehead. In the hole were the remains of a bonfire, it was deep with

smouldering ash.

"What happened?"

"Fire," he said simply. "Tecalote said to keep it burning for three days."

"Where's Kyle?"

Chris shook his head "Gone. They're gone."

That's right, Wymee remembered. Kyle had asked Donny about taking him to the bus station. Maybe they hadn't left yet. "How come you didn't go?" she asked Chris.

He smiled complicitly. "Not my time."

Not only was Donny gone, so was his motorhome. All that remained was a square of green carpet that had lain beneath the awning. Wymee didn't even get off her bike.

When she got to The Range, Mike Bright's RV was still parked out back.

"Hey Mike," she called out below the sliding bedroom window. She half expected there to be no response, but she heard him rumble something that sounded like an invitation. When she entered, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, listening to the baseball game.

"Wymee in the Slabs," he observed, "still in the Slabs."

"Do you know where Donny is?" she asked bluntly.

His face darkened. "It's a terrible thing." He shook his head. "The cops came by

and talked to me this morning, asking if I knew where he was. They told me what happened, probably thinking I'd cooperate better." He looked dispirited. "There's been a kid hanging around his place. Little blond fella. Well, apparently Donny did something to him, I don't know- makes me sick to think about it. The kid's grandma found out and called the cops last night."

"James?" asked Wymee.

Donny looked at her, surprised. "Yeah, I think that's his name. The kid's dad called Donny and threatened him, so Donny knew to cut and run." He took off his glasses and wiped at his eyes. "I never had any problem with Donny, but I got no truck with child molesters. He brought his rooster over last night, asked if I'd take care of it while he went on a trip. Of course, he didn't tell me why he was leaving. If you see him you can tell him that a week from now, ol' Red will be going in the cooking pot."

Wymee began to say something about the CD-R Donny had found, but Mike cut her off. "That's enough of that," he said irritably. He struggled to crack open a fresh can of beer. Wymee noticed for the first time that he didn't have his shorts on, just a long t-shirt that hung down over a grubby pair of underwear.

"Get the hell out of here," said Mike sadly, and she did.

Chapter 15

Ghost

No one visited Wymee at the tank that afternoon. She didn't have much to pack, just a few clothes. The things she was leaving behind she set out in the open. She placed a pair of red sunglasses, a "Skinny Puppy" t-shirt she'd never liked, and some work boots next to the camp stove. She left a book on dog training on the shelf next to the coffee table. She knew what happened to people who wore out their welcome in the Slabs. They got burned out, their camps literally burned to the ground. The concrete water tank itself wouldn't burn, but that was a small comfort. Up on the roof she ate the last of her peanut butter. There were no cars or people visible in any direction and it gave her the eerie feeling that everyone was doing the same thing she was: lying low and waiting for her to leave.

When the chamber turned pitch black and the sky showing through the aperture above was a dark shade of blue, she left. The temperature was dropping as she made her way along the base of the mesa, staying well away from the road. At the irrigation canal she crossed over a small footbridge, then walked through the lemon grove. When she emerged on the other side, she was next to the storage yard. As she passed along its back fence, she looked in at the rows of vehicles. There, between two motorboats was the Scout, or what looked like it. She stood there squinting through the fence into the dark, then moved on.

At the edge of town, she followed the tracks to a place where she could hide

behind a pile of railroad ties and wait for the train. She sat for a while in the sand, unable to remember what came next, then pulled out her sleeping bag and lay down. The ground was cold and uncomfortable, and the train would be even colder, lying on the metal. She closed her eyes. There was cardboard in the dumpster behind the grocery store, but that meant walking along the road into town. She could figure something out when the train stopped in Colton, before she caught the next one up to Sacramento. *Am I running away, or going towards something?* she wondered. There didn't seem to be any difference. The sand leached Wymee's heat through the thin sleeping bag, and she rubbed her thighs every few minutes to keep warm. She tried to will herself to sleep, thinking about sex and lemon meringue pie.

She was remembering being ten years old, when it occurred to her that she was no longer cold; her muscles had relaxed. She could feel heat radiating from outside the sleeping bag, from somewhere nearby. She pushed her head up and opened her eyes.

Crouching in front of her was Insane Wayne, next to a low-burning fire. He was staring at her with an inscrutable expression. In the flickering light, his skin was almost gold. He looked healthier than she'd ever seen him look in life; he'd died the day after she left, last fall. Wayne was sitting just a few feet away, tending the fire. There was the black outline of the railway ties over his shoulder and the rise of the tracks to his right. She blinked in surprise and he was gone. She was back in the dark, back in the cold, but beneath her the ground had begun to vibrate.

