Twentynine Palms

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PREFACE

They found the bones on the ridge of a long, low rise, jumbled and scattered, sun-bleached white, half-buried in the ochre ground, looking recently surfaced, as though the earth had a great store of skeletons it was slowly pushing upward, one by one. *Poor thing*, Annie said, the same thing she always said when they found dead animals in the desert. She and Joe walked on, speculating aloud on what the bones were. A young bighorn, maybe, sick or injured or something, though there was no skull. Could be a coyote, they went on, probably too big though. About the right size for a deer, they were deciding, but then they reached the hand and stopped short, their words sucked away into the breeze. There was nothing else it could be but a hand, all those little white bones laid out perfectly, as though something had politely eaten away all the tissue without touching the skeleton and left it there for them to find.

Oh no, said Annie, and she put down her hiking poles and knelt next to it.

It could be something else, said Joe, next to her, flexing his own left hand above the skeletal one, looking at how it matched almost exactly.

Annie followed the hand's pointer finger to a low gray-green bush. Something under it, half-hidden, visible only to someone kneeling: a skull.

It's that boy, she said, and she picked up the three bones of one finger, held them in her palm, started to cry.

Maybe, said Joe, rubbing her back. She sniffled and wiped her face on her shoulder, looked at the flat wide world around them.

He got lost, she said, he came up here to get his bearings. Her thumb rubbed the bones in her palm.

They turned back and reached the police station in Twentynine Palms late that night. Annie brought the finger bones in case they needed proof, but at the last minute, she only handed over two and kept the third in her pocket. Maybe she felt protective of it, felt she and this desert-dead boy had something in common and she could do right by him. Maybe she just liked collecting dead things. Everyone knew Annie was a little off.

The desert swallows everything. Think of it as insatiable, the way it leaches the color from everything, buildings and people and cars and roadways, whole towns, whole landscapes, everything different shades of a rust brown. It sucks the light out of the sunrise, when the mountains leave long cool shadows and the light is a pleasing soft gold, the hills look like folded velvet. When the sun heaves itself over the horizon the light flattens out and everything goes still. At noon the silence roars. The entire earth is every shade of yellow and tan and brown, the sky a blue that fades around the edges. You can see the horizon bending away and you're ringed in by mountains like teeth, like you're standing in the open maw of the world and it could snap shut at any moment. At dusk the

heat sinks into the ground and the chill bleeds in from the horizon as the sky and earth are beautiful again, briefly. The nights are dark, a new kind of darkness, viscous, swirling, only made darker by whatever circle of light you entrap yourself within.

This desert is our desert, the Mojave, the long dry expanse of Eastern California, Western Nevada and Arizona before it fades into other deserts, uniform to the untrained eye: the Sonora, the Great Basin, the Chihuahua. Time and distance don't exist the same way here, don't mean the same thing: the desert seems flat and isn't, seems simple and isn't, seems tame and isn't. Drive across the desert, and you'll get to the far side, blinking the sun from your eyes, hours gone, days maybe, your only memory of a long flat khaki landscape, rumpled mountains, fast food in a squat town right off the freeway, and a long pulsing sense of unease that you can't pinpoint or name.

Civilization trickled down the highways from the big cities of the coast, Los Angeles and San Diego, and it headed east until it finally dried up just inside the Mojave. It rode on the interstates, I-10 and I-15 and I-40, Route 66 and Old 66, the two-lane blacktop of the state highways with names no one uses. West to east the towns go: small, smaller, smallest, nothing.

Palm Springs, Cathedral City, Desert Center, nothing.

Victorville, Barstow, Baker, nothing.

Joshua Tree, Yucca Valley, Twentynine Palms, nothing.

William Capp vanished here three years ago, went out on a hike and never came back. Two years and nine months ago, after the searchers had given up, hikers found his campsite but not him: tent, stove, empty water bottles, and inside the collapsed tent, still

in good condition: *Facts and Fables of the Lost Celestial Mine*, published first in 1931 and then again and again over the years. Finding his campsite meant another flurry of activity by searchers, since the campsite was nowhere near where he'd told people he was going. Will was a known oddball, even odder than the usual Celestial hunter, and people speculated he'd thought he was being followed by other Celestial-hunting oddballs and intentionally misled them. He'd been thirty-five, not a boy, eleven years older than Annie's own son. The San Bernardino Sheriff sent people out to collect the bones for burial and wouldn't confirm that they were his until they matched his dental records, but everyone knew it was him.

The Mojave grows legend like rainy places grow weeds, not surprising for somewhere that's hard to survive, somewhere the night is so dark. They say there's a mountain where the god of thunder lives, and if you climb it in a lightning storm, you can meet him. To find the right mountain, you might have to climb all of them. Lodged high above the ground in some canyon is an old a Spanish galley, its prow and stern deep in the canyon walls, the ship full of gold, silver, rubies, long-dead men, depending on who you listen to. Somewhere is a white raven, and if you can catch it, he tells you when you're going to die.

They say there's a lost mine shaft sunk to a wide, deep river of gold, a vein so pure and soft anyone can pry the metal from the mine walls. The Spanish dug it five hundred years ago and carted off tons of gold, but the Indians who already lived in the Mojave wanted it for themselves, so they attacked one of the gold-laden mule trains headed to Mexico and slaughtered the Spanish in a blind canyon near the mine. Legend

has it the bodies were piled knee deep in the narrow gorge, bodies that quickly became bones as every desert scavenger feasted for a week. El Cañon de los Huesos. If you can find it you can find the mine.

The last person to see the mine was the Celestial, a Chinese man who showed up in Twentynine Palms one day near the turn of the century and bought supplies with gold nuggets. He spoke English with a heavy accent, lived somewhere out in the desert, and died of a fever in town. No one ever figured out how a man from clear across the globe was the one to find it and no one has seen the mine since, but of course people keep searching. It's dangerous. The desert likes to keep its secrets. More people have died looking for the Lost Celestial Mine than have ever seen it.

After the police station, Annie went home late, showered, had dinner. She put the dishes in the sink and then pulled Will's fingertip, his right distal phalanx, from her pocket and held it, running her own fingers over the porous surface, fitting the pad of her own thumb into the concavity, finally setting it in the window next to a bighorn skull. She turned off the lights, locked the house, got into her Jeep and drove west.

Between Twentynine Palms and Yucca Valley, she parked just below the crest of a blind hill around midnight and kept her headlights on, pointing into the vast dark along the edge of the road. She got out of her car and left the driver's side door open. She started across the road and then something happened, she didn't see the headlights or didn't care, didn't hear the engine or ignored it, and the car doing eighty over that hill

crested it and hit her, full-on. It broke her spine and her pelvis and both femurs, snapped her neck, crushed her ribcage, punctured one lung, ruptured most of her organs.

It stopped two hundred feet away and someone got out, someone wearing jeans and an oversized sweatshirt and flip flops. They stopped twenty feet from Annie and stood perfectly still for ten seconds, then twenty, breathing faster and faster, and then they sprinted back to the car and drove away.

At five that morning, a waitress driving to work at the truck stop in Yucca Valley found her. She was long gone and so was the driver who'd done it. No one ever knew what to make of it: why Annie didn't see the car, why she didn't move, why she was stopped on a highway at one in the morning to begin with. As the coroner's van drove her away, people started to talk about two bodies in twenty-four hours. They started to say that it hadn't been Will Capp, it had been El Cañon, that the mine was cursed.

CHAPTER ONE

It was raining in Ukiah, a town in the woods two hours north of San Francisco, when two policemen came to Brian's door and asked if they could come in. That meant bad news, he knew right away, and his mouth went dry as he invited them into the living room and thought of every terrible scenario: his father having a sudden heart attack, Michelle in a car wreck in the mountains, her parents fallen or drowned or electrocuted or murdered, scenarios that made no sense, not that sense mattered.

The officers sat neatly on their long blue couch, hats off, and the taller one told Brian his mother had died. They'd just gotten the call from the San Bernardino Sheriff. A hit and run and they didn't catch the guy, he said gently. I see, Brian said, and he nodded and dropped his head toward his knees in relief. Thanks. He got the Sheriff's number and said he'd call, showed the two officers out, then sat on the boot bench and stared at the wall. He called it a boot bench, anyway; Michelle called it the "landing area," where everything "landed" when you came into the house. Their house had a lot of areas, a lot of pretty books left open on tables, old-looking knickknacks carefully placed for show.

Brian tried not to touch most of it. His shoulder brushed a wet raincoat drying on a hook, and he noticed he'd left his slippers on the staircase again. He stood and put them on. Easier than taking them all the way upstairs to the bedroom.

He called his father and said: well, she wasn't dead, but now she is. His father said, you should go down, take as much time off work as you need. He called Michelle, heading back from a girls' weekend in Tahoe that she kept calling a *babymoon* even though she wasn't pregnant yet. She said he had two weeks, and offered to go with him. Brian said he'd be fine. He called the San Bernardino Sheriff and they said they opened at 9am the next day, so he spent fifteen minutes packing shirts and underwear, and he drove south.

It was an eleven-hour drive down Interstate 5 and Brian did it all in one shot with not much more than donuts, truck stop coffee, and late-night radio. It felt good to disregard his wellbeing for once, in this small way, to recklessly drive for so many hours with no sleep. He hadn't done something dumb like this since college. The sun came up over Bakersfield, an ugly city if he'd ever seen one. The smog glowed a dull purple in the morning light, noxious and pretty as he'd cut east over yet another rim of mountains. He didn't know where he was going beyond the address in his GPS, and his eyes felt like sandpaper.

At the visitor's parking lot of the San Bernardino Sheriff he stopped, put the driver's seat all the way back and got three hours of sleep in the car. When they opened, he did a mountain of paperwork, half of which he didn't know the right answer to. They asked if she could be cremated, if there was a funeral home she could be transported to, what arrangements should be made. Brian begged a few days to think about things; he

didn't want to tell them the whole story, so he said that their relationship had been strained, he hadn't seen her in a while, that he needed to figure some things out. He told them he'd come back soon for her big white Jeep and collected the evidence bags of what had been in there, and finally, he set out for the final two hours of the drive, east on State Route 62 through increasingly insignificant towns.

And then finally, he was there, at her house, and he wondered if he should have come at all. Small, cinderblock, dirt yard fenced in with cheap chain link. A neighbor on either side, to the north and south, part of a small neighborhood, road to the front, desert out back. Why bother fencing off the back, he wondered, the same yellow-brown dirt stretched away to an unscalable mountain maybe half a mile away, maybe a mile. Maybe two. He had lost his sense of distance on the long drive. Everything here was a straight line: the highway, the dirt tracks that disappeared off of it at perpendicular angles. The buildings, flat-roofed in the sun. The horizon. Everything about the desert seemed wrong to Brian, like he was constantly being watched, like he was too exposed, like the world was too big.

Two windows on the front of the house, the front door between them. The front door and the cinderblocks painted white, both windows covered from the inside in something shiny. The house still cast a shadow, a puddle slowly drying at Brian's feet. Its lines seemed too angular and sharp, like the treeless mountains north and south of town, like the few people he'd seen. The only other shade was an enormous tree-sized cactus standing to the right of the concrete steps, leafless and skeletal. The bottom had hardened into something like a trunk and the fleshy, spiky tops drooped skyward as if it were being squashed by the sun.

Brian made some wishes though he had no evidence they'd be answered. It was 11:49, not even a lucky time, but he wished he'd worn shorts and sandals. He wished his father had said, don't bother, instead of, you should go, she was still your mother. He wished he had a sibling, someone to stand next to in front of this ugly little house, someone he could discuss important questions with, questions like, shouldn't we just cremate her? Should we just burn the house down?

It was getting hotter by the moment and sweat slid down Brian's spine. Not even noon and the heat rippled across his skin. Truck stop caffeine swirled with the uncomfortable sleep in his brain, made the whole scene shift off-kilter, seem somehow haunted. He didn't want to open that door, but why else was he here? The sun never blinked. He imagined trees and carports and doghouses spontaneously bursting into flames under the desert sun, turning to scraps of ash in seconds and floating away, like leaves under a magnifying glass. He imagined himself bursting into flames: better than opening the door? Maybe. Maybe if he stood there long enough, one of them, either him or the house, would flame up and float away and then he wouldn't have to open the door. The keys jiggled in his hand.

The deadbolt shot back with a satisfying snap and the same key turned the doorknob and then he was in. It was dark but at least it didn't smell bad: musty, metallic, the scent of new dirt and old paper, but nothing dire. The Sheriff's office had told him they "didn't know" if she'd had any animals at some point, or if she'd been hoarding food under the bed, like some did when they went nutty. Not that she was nutty, the officer on duty had told Brian when she saw his face, and Brian had pondered the comment pair the whole way here.

No one had been in the house since she'd left it. Accidental deaths didn't warrant a search. The door only opened halfway before it ground to a halt, hitting something solid with a thunk, the floor nearly covered in a pile of rocks except for a six-inch pathway down the center of the hallway. Grit crunched under his sneakers and he placed both feet carefully on the pathway before twisting around to shut the door behind him. In a few hours, he thought, this place will be a million degrees.

"Hello?" he shouted.

No answer. Of course there was no answer. He put his right hand on the wall to steady himself as he brought his right foot in front of his left, still in a line one in front of the other. The rocks were just rocks, they didn't look like anything special, but Brian couldn't bring himself to step on them. There was something of her in every detail of the house, the way each rock was stacked, the way each dust mote fell through the hot, still air, like if he could just put the clues together in the right order he would know her again. His fingers on the wall skimmed over paper and he looked closer in the dim light, eyes adjusting: a map of somewhere with a ragged coastline, a language he didn't know with a lot of consonants. He looked at the other wall, another map, this one no coastline but two square feet of mountains. The type was too small to read in this light, and he touched both at once, feet in a line, hands spread, and felt lost.

Brian looked through the whole house in the same slow, methodical way, taking note of everything and touching as little as possible. The first door on the left was a bedroom, the double bed neatly made with a plaid comforter and matching side tables on either side. A bathrobe hung from a hook next to one side, a door probably led to a closet, a mountain of shoes waited at the foot of the bed. One wall was lined with pegboard and

had a massive tangle of climbing equipment hanging from it—some modern, some old. A vanity held dusty perfume bottles in what looked like rusted tin dishes. Brian stepped one foot inside to look further. Under the bed was filled with plastic crates, and piles of books, neatly stacked to equal height, covered a good percentage of the floor. There was almost nowhere to walk, but it looked neat, if dusty. A book lay on one side table but Brian couldn't read the title from the door.

He'd spent a good portion of the drive trying to remember what she sounded like. Her pictures were still in his father's office: one of her and Brian when he was in elementary school, her hugging him from behind, next to Brian's solo high school and college graduation photos; the other of just her face, smiling, tiny. Her voice escaped him, though, and on the road he'd thought of games he hadn't played with himself for years: Do I Remember Her Face? What Hand Did She Use? How Did She Sound When She Said 'Spaghetti Tonight'? Standing in her room, he wondered if she'd smelled like this, dust and dirt and a faint hint of some perfume, but it didn't trigger anything.

A drop of sweat spilled down his temple and landed on his shirt. He scanned the bedroom one last night, both relieved and sad that he didn't recognize anything, not that he'd expected to. She'd barely taken anything.

From the front hall piled with rocks, the living room was on the right, twice the size of the bedroom. Under the front window, covered over in what Brian thought was a space blanket, was a long low dresser covered in plants. Cacti mostly, some other small leafless green things. Succulents maybe. They didn't look great, Brian thought, being next to a window doesn't help if all the light is blocked out. Blocking most of the drawers were perilous, waist-high piles of newspapers, in an Asian language Brian couldn't read.

The other walls except the far one, against the back of the house, were lined with bookshelves filled half with books and half with knickknacks, odds and ends, more beat up tin dinnerware, ancient-looking medicine bottle still half-coated in dirt, jars in all the colors of blue.

Boxes covered the center of the floor. Brian realized there was a table in the middle of it, barely visible with boxes under and on top, only a vase with fake poinsettias peeking red over the top of cardboard. He jumped when he saw the iguana, sitting perfectly still on top of another bookshelf, until he looked down the entire shelf and realized it was filled with dead animals: a taxidermied turtle—tortoise?—some kind of rodent skeleton, a stuffed raven, and on the very bottom shelf a jumble of skeletons he couldn't begin to identify. He eyed the iguana, then grabbed a poinsettia from the vase on the table and poked at its tail with the plastic stem. Definitely dead.

Along the far wall was one recliner, a floor lamp, a side table, and a wood-paneled cathode ray television. There was a glass of water on the side table, three-quarters empty. Brian picked it up and held it to eye-height, looking at it, watching a particle of something fall through slowly, the movement breaking the surface tension enough for it to sink. No lip markings on the rim that he could see. He put it down and turned on the TV, pushing in a big silver button that made a satisfying *thunk*. The picture came up before the sound, swaying in blues and greens, static running through the faces before the sound roared in and they reverted to the colors of the living. A skinny blond in a tall chair sat, legs crossed, while a bald man on a tall chair opposite her said something about what sunscreen she should wear this summer. She nodded and her hair bounced. Brian turned it back off with a snap, looked back over the living room.

It didn't seem like there was anything wrong, the place was locked up tight, neat but dusty, bed made, half-finished book, no suicide note, but Brian wanted to find some obvious clue, something that stuck out and grabbed his attention that said: this is who she was, this is what she was doing here, this is why she died. He wanted mysteries to have answers, he wanted puzzles to be solvable, not the kind of person who could abide an unanswerable riddle. The Bermuda Triangle actually has no more ships go missing than any other part of the ocean, he knew. Amelia Earhart crashed into the Pacific.

If she'd killed herself, the coroner had told him that morning, she would have been standing, facing oncoming traffic. Everything pointed to an accident as she crossed the road, they said. But what did it matter if she was looking into the headlights or into the dark? Listening to her over a pile of paperwork, the question hadn't occurred to him then, but here in her house the questions came to him like friendly dogs, rolled over for their bellies to be scratched.

He walked into the kitchen at the back of the house, suddenly light-filled from two sets of windows looking out over the desert, one with a small cactus and another with an animal skull and some small, pointed bone. There was a formica table, laden with maps, two rickety wooden chairs. He leaned against the counter and rubbed his eyes against the light, shook his head, collected himself. Got a drink of water and went looking for a pencil and paper, something to make himself a plan of action and organize himself. He'd feel better, he'd be more capable, if he didn't have to think through every step on the spot.

Nothing on the table besides maps. This was the way he'd come: there was highway 62 coming east from the LA area, then Joshua Tree and Yucca Valley and

Twentynine Palms and then 62 just went on and on until it hit the dotted line at the Arizona border. Well, there was probably some other stuff between here and there, truck stops and gas stations and that kind of thing, just not marked on a map. On top of the other maps, the USGS maps and the topographic maps and the trail maps, all of the same area, was the AAA road map of the Mojave Desert And Environs. Brian looked over it carefully. He liked to get the lay of the land, and the directions he'd taken here on his GPS didn't really do that for him. He put one finger on his approximate location, Bedouin Avenue, and looked around. One road led into the large green area of the national park, a few led north off the map, and 62 cut through, east to west, thin lines against the tyranny of space.

He refilled his water glass and spotted a pen and notepad from Daryl's Desert Towing by the phone. His list:

1. Find a motel for tonight, I can't sleep here
2. Go back to Sheriff: cremation? Jeep? Will?
3. Who do I have to tell she's dead? Banks, insurance, utilities, car payment, etc.
4. Clean house
5. Find real estate agent and sell house

Written like that it didn't seem too bad. Five easy steps. Solid tasks, goals, things he could actually accomplish, no "Understand why mom left," no "Get to know a dead woman." He wondered when grief would come, if it were coming, if it were uncontainable in to-do lists or memory games.

The house was heating up in the sun and Brian was beginning to feel like he was in an oven. A kiln. His eyes felt like sandpaper on the insides of his lids.

* * *

Nothing really set the El Rancho Dolores apart from the other motels in Twentynine Palms; low-slung, whitewashed adobe, chipping red tile roof, one story tall. A small swimming pool out front only separated from the road by a fence, surrounded by rusting white metal chairs. Two yucca plants framed the plate glass front doors. Inside, Evelyn watched TV from behind the desk, muting it when Brian walked in and asked for a room.

"All I've got until Wednesday is a king room," she told him. Evelyn didn't believe in technology so she still used a log book, and leafed through each page carefully, going down the columns with one finger. "It's an extra twenty per night."

"That's fine," said Brian.

"How long are you staying?" she asked, without looking up. She wished she'd said thirty. People in Twentynine Palms, even the visitors she dealt with, didn't shrug off a twenty like that.

"At least three nights," he said. "What's that, Thursday?"

"Sure is," she said, and marked out the dates with a yellow highlighter in the book. When she finally looked up he was younger than he sounded and looked beat. "After that, if you want, I can switch you to a double."

He waved a hand in response and there was something in it that she recognized, just for a split second. Evelyn saw a lot of people, most only once or twice when they

came or went in the lobby of the Dolores, but something about that gesture seemed more familiar.

"Three-sixty plus tax," she said, and she examined his face as he dug through his wallet, rifling through its features with her eyes.

"Do you take Discover?" he said, speaking into his wallet.

"Sure do."

He gave her the card.

"You here on vacation?" she asked, turning away to swipe his card in the machine. It was off, but she swiped anyway.

"Not really."

"Business?" she waited as though for a receipt from the machine, then frowned at it theatrically.

"Family emergency," he said, resting both elbows on the counter and leaning forward.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Evelyn said. One hand floated to rest above her heart and she made eye contact. Then she flipped the credit card machine on, waited.

"Thanks," he said.

"I hope it's nothing serious," she said, swiping it through one more time.

"Death in the family, actually."

Well, that all but confirmed it. Annie dies and in twenty-four hours a young man with her face and her mannerisms shows up. He was here for the house, Evelyn assumed, the house and that nice Jeep. As far as she knew, he'd never visited Annie down here, but Evelyn and Annie hadn't been close, not really more than acquaintances. Half of what

she knew about the woman was rumor, about her habits, about her relationships, about her house itself, and though Evelyn wasn't credulous enough to believe that it was over the mine shaft itself, she thought there was something odd about a house with tinfoil in the windows, something un-neighborly. Probably a sign of something unsavory going on. She'd never gotten a proper report on the inside, either, just rumors.

"That's terrible," she said as the young man's receipt printed. "Let us know if there's anything we can do."

He nodded, signed the receipt and took the yellow copy. "Let me know if you need to know what to do around town," she said, already thinking of her exclusive, the story on Annie's son no one else had yet. "Room ten is around the corner, first one on the right. Park under the carport, the sun'll getcha down here."

"Thanks," he said, and walked back out the front door.

Evelyn waited until he was gone, counted to thirty, and then went into the back room and picked up the phone.

Six hours later he came back, this time in shorts and a t-shirt, looking showered and rested, more of a bounce in his step. Evelyn stood straighter behind the counter, used the remote to turn down Wheel of Fortune on the TV in the corner.

"Is there good Mexican food around here?" he asked.

"Campos has good burritos," she said. "Right onto 62 and then two, maybe three lights. On the left."

"Thanks," he said, and began to walk to the door, stopped, wheeled around. "Is there anything fun to do on a Monday night?"

Evelyn's eyebrows shot up. Fun, right after his mother died like that? Fun, and her not cold in the ground?

"I don't know that it's fun," she said, "but the Dirty Cactus is open. There's not much else." She gave him directions and he left through the doors without ever noticing her disapproval.

Chapter Two

Julie drove the mile from the bar to the CVS very carefully. She'd only had the one beer and she thought her driving was about normal, but it never hurt to be careful. Eight days in a row it was now she'd stopped by for a drink before heading into work, the point where she was beginning to think she ought to be doing something else: either keep the alcohol in the house and drink in the kitchen, or stop drinking before she got to work. The latter was the better choice. The former was the more likely, especially if she was going to keep her mom in her life.

"You missed all the fun," Sylvia said, standing behind the checkout counter at CVS, half looking at Julie and half reading People magazine.

"What fun," Julie said. *Fun* in the context of the CVS was never good; at best it was interesting, a deviation from the dull shuffle of the days ticking by, but at worst, *fun* was a bunch of tweakers trying to smuggle out fifty boxes of cold medicine under winter parkas in hundred-degree weather, or *fun* was some Marine from the base just north of town convincing his girlfriend to take titty pictures in the shampoo aisle, or *fun* was one

of the senior citizens from the RV park outside town pissing all over the vitamins in a rage that his prescription wasn't ready yet.

"You know that Revlon endcap that was over there?" Sylvia nodded her head toward the makeup aisles, the frosted tower of her bangs bowing.

Julie glanced at the spot and nodded.

"Well, earlier today, someone managed to completely coat the entire thing in bright red lipstick without anyone noticing," Sylvia said.

Julie almost pointed out that it was Sylvia's job to notice, but didn't. It wouldn't help.

"Then, as we're trying to figure out what to do with it, whether we can clean it or whatever, Tommy comes over, takes one look, and flips out."

Tommy was the CVS security guard. They'd had so much product walk that they needed one, and sales were so low that all they could afford was Tommy, a mean, dried-looking old white man who lived in a house out on its own in the desert with an entire garage devoted to nothing but his gun collection. His truck, oversized and sun-beaten, was a rolling testament to his belief in the continued relevance of the Second Amendment. He liked to accuse nonwhite teenagers of "looking too much" and escort them out of the store, but didn't catch it when fifteen bottles of Nyquil disappeared.

"Flips out how," said Julie.

"He starts yelling about red is the Bloods' color, and this is a gang symbol, and they've marked the CVS as Bloods' territory now, and that wouldn't even be so bad, he says, except for twenty years now this town has been the *Crips* territory, and so this lipstick endcap is an open declaration of gang warfare."

“Did he consider this a reason he should be permitted to carry a firearm on the job?” Julie asked.

“He did,” Sylvia said.

“Great,” said Julie. “Looks like you took it down and put the lipstick on the regular shelves?”

“Yeah, it was unsalveagable.”

Julie turned so her back was to the closed circuit camera that monitored the checkout counter, bent slightly at the waist, and grabbed a twin pack of peanut butter cups. She slid one across to Sylvia, who looked skeptical.

“I’m stress eating,” Julie said. “It’s fine.”

Sylvia looked around with the least furtive glance Julie had ever seen, and finally took a bite of the candy. “You heard about the Celestial?” she asked.

“I don’t live under a rock.”

“My sister’s big on the curse, you know. She thinks Bill and Annie both found it. That’s why they both died.”

“Joe, what, was looking the other way?”

Sylvia popped more candy into her mouth and shrugged.

“They got any leads on that car?” Sylvia’s brother-in-law worked with the police.

“Nothing. Told the news the search was going on, but they’ve got no clue. She was there for hours.” Julie kept a mental list of good ways to die, a list she’d had since she was a child. *Hit by car while pedestrian* was somewhere around the 75th percentile, considerably above *head-on collision while in car* and *trapped in car underwater.* The faster the car was going, the higher the death climbed in her estimation. Ranked much

lower were the long slow deaths—starving, hypothermia, heat—and at the bottom were her personal fears: trapped under rubble, asphyxiation.

"Can't they find paint flecks on her or something and run that through a database?" she asked.

"You watch too much TV."

Julie couldn't argue with that. She crumpled up the orange wrapper and stuck in her pocket, back still to the camera.

"Who gets the money?" she said.

"She have money?"

"Sure. She bought that house, had that Jeep, took all those trips, didn't work."

"Didn't she live in one of those little cinderblock houses down off Bedouin, though?"

"They're not free."

Sylvia shrugged. "I think Ray said she had a son who was coming down."

"Huh," Julie said. She'd always wondered about Annie's money, despite her best intentions. For some reason it wasn't the object of gossip in town, probably because she was modest enough with it: little house, practical car for her lifestyle, nothing flashy. Annie was the right kind of lady to be rich: middle-aged, white, volunteered with the national park, friendly with everyone around town. The sort of person who just seemed like she should have money, so no one thought it was odd that she said she was retired in her mid-forties; there were whispers that she'd really taken an ex-husband in a divorce, but it was hard to believe that about Annie. Julie knew not everyone had noticed the money but she had. She'd tallied and wondered.

"How are you for cigarettes up here?" she asked.

Sylvia turned around, her big dream catcher earrings swinging. "We should be fine. It's been a slow morning."

Julie nodded at her magazine. "Stars?"

"Brad and Angie bought a house in France. Twelve bedrooms, two pools."

"Too much to clean."

"Yeah, I wouldn't want it," Sylvia said, and Julie walked toward the back of the store, grabbing tampons from the shampoo aisle, bandaids from the tampon aisle, ex-lax from the bandaid aisle, thinking already about the conversation she'd had with her mother two hours ago. That was the problem with this place, this job, the problem with being perfect boring Julie Gutierrez: it was only boring until it was complicated in ways she didn't want.

Julie was the first thing she said to herself every morning in a whisper, a habit she'd picked up years ago. Start your day with your name and you won't forget it, he'd said, though after a while you're going to want to. She'd found herself able to forget every other name but the first, that one connected to some animal part of her brain, as though Guadalupe was a string attached to her head, jerking it toward whichever mother was chastising her daughter, whoever was looking for someone in a crowd shouting *Lupe, Lupe*. Eighteen years felt like a long time to be someone to Julie, already growing weary of herself.

* * *

"Have you ever met him?" Isabel asked. She adjusting her reading glasses and looked down, her lips moving as she silently counted stitches.

"Technically, no," Julie said. She still wore her CVS uniform and both her elbows were propped on Isabel's kitchen table, hands akimbo in the air, a skein of light pink yarn held taut between them. Two cups of tea steamed on perfect white doilies and a cigarette smoldered in a black and gold Caesar's Palace ashtray.

"Technically?"

"We've talked on the phone a few times. His picture is on my parents' fridge. They'd send a new one every year when I was a kid."

"Don't yank on it. It's supposed to drape, you're going to make me pull this too tight," Isabel said without looking up.

Julie moved her hands closer together.

"Who told him?"

"No one. He doesn't know yet. He'll get it when he shows up, if he even makes it."

"How old?"

"Twenty-two."

Isabel's face softened. "He's coming alone?"

Julie nodded.

Isabel knitted in silence for a few stitches to the end of the row, the overhead shining off her needles. "That's hard," she finally said. "Even when it's legal it's hard. You sure you want to help?"

"He's family," Julie said.

"Family will be our downfall," Isabel said. "Haven't you seen *The Godfather*?"

"I'm not sure that's what that movie is about."

"All the same," Isabel said. "You can't say no." She arranged the knitting along the needle, flipped it around, started knitting back the other way. "I could say no for you. That way, you tried."

Jorge had been eight in the last picture his mother had sent to hers, the youngest son of her youngest uncle, so when she pictured him, she thought of a serious child wearing a hand-me-down collared shirt a little too big for him, fresh haircut, adult teeth still just a little too big for his mouth, and that was who she thought of crossing the desert, lying in the back of a pickup truck underneath pallets of flowers, however they were smuggling people these days. She wished her mother had said something about this when they talked last month, because there were better ways to get across. Work visas weren't too bad, especially when you had blood relatives who were natural-born.

"It's all right. I want to help."

"When is he coming?"

"She didn't know. Could be days, could be a week, whenever the coyote thinks is a good time."

Isabel wore bright red lipstick, even at home, and now it thinned in disapproval. "You know I don't like doing things on short notice."

"I only just found out myself."

"You'd have found out before if you called your mother more than once a month. What do you think, the FBI tapped her phone?" According to Isabel, gravest of Julie's sins was her failure to call her mother often enough, something that Isabel seemed to be personally insulted by, as though Julie had consulted with Isabel's grown children and persuaded them that this frequency was enough. She knew, by now, what questions Isabel

wanted answered and what she didn't. Julie waited, looking at the light pink yarn stretched between her hands.

"A social security card is enough?" Isabel asked.

"Yeah. Something he can get a job with."

"Okay," Isabel said, nodding. "That shouldn't be so bad." She took a sip of her tea, a drag on her cigarette, readjusted the two pillows she sat on. At 4'11", she needed the help.

"What are you making?" Julie asked. When she'd gotten to Isabel's, she'd been ordered to hold the yarn, no explanation. She thought that people usually wound the yarn into balls, but she didn't know anything about knitting so she didn't argue.

"Baby blanket. Tara's having a girl."

"Congratulations," Julie said. The blanket was going to reek, but she kept her mouth shut.

Isabel snorted. "Twenty three and she'll have two babies. I don't know what to do with her."

Tara was Isabel's youngest, the baby of five, the only girl, and Isabel's goal had been to give her a different life than hers had been. Tara had her first baby at twenty, later by two years than her mother, but not the kind of progress Isabel would have liked to see. Ethan, the father, only married her after Clem gave the boy a talking-to during which, according to Isabel, he referenced his gun collection and military training at least three times.

"How are the other kids?" Julie asked. This was how Isabel operated: one came, made a request which was either granted or denied, but one stayed to make conversation

and drink tea. Isabel saw no real boundary between business and friendship and considered leaving after a transaction rude.

"Mark is in Los Angeles with the blond whore," Isabel said. Julie had never learned the whore's name. "They never visit. She keeps him out there. Matthew's in Phoenix with his kids. Doesn't visit either. Luke's still in Afghanistan, but," she said, looking up from her knitting to make eye contact with Julie, "John's getting divorced. No kids. She cheated on him during his last deployment." Isabel was notorious at the Blessed Sacrament Church for naming her four sons after the four evangelists and then her daughter after the estate in Gone With The Wind.

Julie shook her head. "That's terrible," she said.

"Spent all his money while he was gone. She never visited us, never called, even though I reached out all the time. Turns out she was sleeping with some mechanic on base, and now he's kicked out too. Serves them both right. He filed last week."

Julie ignored the suggestion. She was over thirty and had told everyone she'd come to Twentynine Palms after a bad divorce, and everyone seemed to know just the right guy for her. Levels of concern varied from person to person, but Isabel in particular seemed determined that the should get married and either confused or offended that she didn't want kids.

"How's Clem?"

Isabel snorted. "He's come home with the clap again. Don't yank on the yarn. Fucking truck stop whores."

"Jeez." Julie slackened the tension.

"Watch your mouth in my house," Isabel said without looking up.

"Sorry," Julie said.

"All I want is for him to use a rubber," Isabel said, collapsing her hands onto her knitting on the table and looking up at Julie. "Is that so bad? He's away from home for weeks. I understand. One of these days he's going to get AIDS or worse"—Julie had no idea what 'worse' could be in this case—"and then I'll have no choice."

Julie didn't know what 'have no choice' meant either, she'd never asked, and she wasn't about to start now. There wasn't a lot she'd put past Isabel.

"Why won't he use rubbers?" asked Julie.

Isabel rolled her eyes. "You know men," she said. "'Too tight,' he says. 'Can't feel nothing,' he says. The day a condom is too tight for Clem is the day when pigs freeze over."

"Hell freezes over," Julie said. "Pigs fly." Isabel's English was nearly perfect, but a few things still eluded her, thirty-five years after she'd come to the US. Sarcasm. Idioms.

"That's what I meant," Isabel said.

"Sure," said Julie. She shifted in her chair and her hands dipped toward each other. Isabel looked up at them, disapprovingly. In silence she counted stitches to herself again, lips moving. Julie watched her fingers work. Isabel reminded her a story she'd heard from a drunk police detective once, up at Tahoe, the kind of guy who had four drinks and then told some stranger his life story. He was there for a bachelor party weekend, and all the other guys had gone into Reno, just across the Nevada border, to a strip club. His wife had left him, though, and he was trying to win her back, so he hadn't gone and was instead getting drunk with a woman he didn't know, and told her about

case he said his buddy had worked: a little old lady beat her husband to death with a frozen leg of lamb, put it in the oven, and called the cops. When the police got there they helped her eat the murder weapon. Julie didn't believe it for a minute, but filed it away under "interesting," like the stories about people who killed with icicles.

"Can your cousin marry?"

Julie picked the yarn back up, careful not to tangle it. "No reason why not. It worked for my mom."

"He like kids?"

"I don't know," Julie said, then she caught Isabel's eye, and laughed. "No. Don't go involving this poor kid with Tara."

"She could use a steady man," Isabel said.

Julie had never met Tara, but felt pretty sure that what she needed wasn't another man to give her problems, but someone to make sure she took her birth control, someone to watch her kids and clean her house, someone to fix her car or give her a ride to work, and above all for people to stop acting like men would fix her problems.

"You don't even know Jorge," Julie said. "He could be worse than Ethan."

Isabel shrugged. "He's your cousin, he can't be so bad." She looked at a clock on the wall. "You should be going," she said.

"Thanks, Izzy," Julie said.

Isabel tapped her fingernails on the formica top of the kitchen table, chin resting on one hand. "You know the rules," she said. "Leave my name out of it. Don't tell anyone who doesn't need telling. Make sure he knows the limitations on this thing, he can get a job with it, not a passport."

"Tell him to get married to a citizen as soon as he can," Julie said. "Legal is always the best way."

"And Julie," Isabel said. "Don't let yourself get sucked into anything."

"I'll try."

"Don't," said Isabel. "You can only help people so much without getting involved in their problems. Don't go making yourself trouble. Even for family."

"I know," Julie said.

* * *

Jorge wasn't the worst problem Julie's mother had brought up on the phone that morning. He was a problem with an answer: Jorge needed paperwork and a job, and though neither was easy, they were goals with solid solutions, ends Julie could plan toward, wheels she could set in motion.

They had been saying their goodbyes, in Spanish, as usual, when Julie's mother suddenly said, *Lupe, I saw an omen.*

Her mother saw omens, and this was a fact the same way that it was a fact that she had brown eyes, that she knew her multiplication tables. It was also a fact that the omens tended to come true in oblique, twisting ways; she'd seen a hawk drop a baby tortoise onto the rocks to get at its meat, and the next day one of Julie's sisters had fallen and broken her leg.

What was it? she asked.

You know Our Lady in the dining room, her mother said.

Yes.

She went missing a week ago. In the morning she was there and at noon she was gone, and your father said he hadn't taken her, and your uncles said they hadn't seen her. So, I thought one of the three of them had taken her and hidden her, sometimes they like to make fun of me, like the time they put salt in the sugar bowl and my coffee was disgusting.

Julie picked at the skin around her thumbnail and waited for her mother to get to the point.

Well, I found her just this morning, and now you call, so that confirms it.

Confirms what, mom?

You know the old train station?

Of course.

Well, I saw something strange up there, on the roof, and you know it's abandoned, but I went in to take a look—

Mom, that place could fall apart any minute, that's dangerous.

—Don't tell me what to do. It was her, on the roof, but it was just her body and not the halo around her, the gold and orange plaster part, and she was kneeling—

—The plaster statue from the dining room? I thought that one was standing.

—Well she usually is but she was kneeling and as I stood there an enormous rattlesnake came out of a crack in the roof and curled itself around her and just went to sleep. And she wasn't moving, Lupe, but I could have sworn she was stroking it.

Why do you think it was your statue?

It just was, Lupe.

The omens were more troubling for being unsolvable, and because they could only be explained in retrospect, because they never came true in the way you thought they would. Julie lay awake at night, wondering where was the train station, who was the rattlesnake.

CHAPTER THREE

Places like the Dirty Cactus Cocktail Lounge, or just *the Cactus*, or just *the bar*, hoard light. In that way one dive is like another, from the jungle to the city to the desert, always low to the ground or under it, dingy door usually closed with folding chairs scattered outside near the ashtrays, neon beer signs shining from blacked-out windows, flickering signs pointing the way. The Cactus' neon sign didn't really flicker, but it should have. It said DIRTY CACTUS in red, all capital letters, COCKTAIL LOUNGE smaller and white beneath that, and off to the right the outline of a martini glass in blue neon piping, all mounted above the front door of a squat, square building, ugly in the daylight and invisible behind its sign after dark.

Behind the always-closed door was a heavy velvet curtain, another tactic against light and heat in the day and the cold at night, practical in a place like this where it was never the right temperature, nearly silent when someone swished through though Dave, the bartender and owner, knew that soft sound instinctually and looked up at everyone who came in. When it was slow he could get a regular's drink ready before they sat at the

bar to order; when Joe came in that night, by the time he got to his spot at the end of the bar, there was already a Coors sitting there on a napkin, open and ready. Joe sat, nodded at Dave, and didn't say anything. He drained the can in a few big gulps. Dave watched, and when Joe finished, poured two shots of tequila and walked over. The glasses made two small, fussy taps on the wooden bar. Joe took one between two fingers and rotated it slowly, and then both men lifted the glasses. Dave frowned.

"Wait," he said, and put down his glass and moved behind the bar, coming back with gin and lime syrup, pouring them together and adding a little soda. Joe saw what he was doing and watched the tequila instead of Dave, who brought the gimlet over on a napkin, set it in front of the empty seat to Joe's right.

"There," he said. The two men clinked their shot glasses together, and Joe touched the bottom of his to the gimlet before tilting it down his throat. The glasses sounded hollowly on the bar. "That's the good stuff," Joe said.

Dave uncorked the bottle again and poured two more. "Bottoms up," he said, and they both clinked the gimlet glass before drinking. Dave poured again.

"Should you be drinking at work?" Joe asked.

Dave shrugged. "Who's gonna fire me?"

They clinked their glasses together and then the gimlet glass, beginning to sweat a little on the outside, and drank again. This time Dave shook his head and stood there, blinking. He didn't refill them again.

Joe was rolling his shot glass between his fingers again, staring into its bottom. "Remember she popped two tires driving over that cholla patch?" he asked.

"And you found her trying to walk back to town with one water bottle and an enormous hat," said Dave.

"Yep," said Joe.

She'd been ten miles out of town, driving on dirt tracks in the open, empty desert east of town, the space owned by the Bureau of Land Management because no one else wanted it. Annie wasn't dumb, just unaccustomed to the realities of the desert, the surprisingly nasty plants that thrived there, and so she'd thought nothing of driving over a small pile of dead cactus branches in her big rugged SUV. Driving down 62 from his house into town, Joe had seen the searing orange of her emergency vest and had driven his pickup truck over. He'd hoped that the story was the first part of a longer romantic one, a story he could tell around town, maybe to Annie's son if they ever met, how he met this woman out wandering the desert and helped her out and then eventually they fell in love. Over the years Joe got used to the idea that it wasn't, and once he had abandoned those hopes he realized that he'd found something better.

Joe reached over the bar, took the bottle and poured himself another shot, then lifted the bottle and his eyebrows at Dave. Dave shook his head. Joe knocked it back and the two men stayed in silence for a minute, Joe staring into the emptiness of the mirror behind the bar and Dave softly tapping his fingertips on the steel counter.

"Evelyn says the son is staying at her place," Dave said suddenly.

"That was fast," Joe said.

"She didn't have a will?"

"I didn't ask."

"Evelyn says she found the mine."

Joe snorted.

"Says you found el Cañon."

Joe shook his head. "It was just that lost boy."

"Annie found the mine and the curse got her."

"The fuck am I doing here, then?"

Dave flipped a bar towel over his shoulder. He shook his head. "Sorry, man."

Joe rubbed condensation from the gimlet glass with the back of one finger. Annie, for all of her loving the outdoors, for all her quick learning about the desert and for all that she'd nearly been one of the guys, hadn't liked beer. He'd never tasted one of her gimlets. She'd offered every time they went over to the Cactus, but he always turned her down, saying he didn't like girly drinks. Then she'd tell him he was sexist and they'd laugh. He took a sip now, through the narrow straw Dave had put in it. Not bad, actually.

"Not bad," he said.

"I don't make bad drinks," said Dave.

* * *

Thirty minutes later the curtain swished open and Brian walked in, looking clean and put together and scrubbed and out of place. He paused for a beat when everyone looked at him, then sat two barstools away from Joe. Dave placed a napkin in front of him and Joe stared, the gimlet glass almost emptied in his hand, still sipping it through the narrow red straw. Brian asked Dave what beers he had on tap. Dave waved his hand at the three taps lined up behind him and Brian studied them like he'd be quizzed later. Joe slurped the last of the gimlet and didn't set the glass down, just held it. Just watched. He'd have known who Brian was anywhere.

“Dave,” he said. Dave was doing something behind the bar and didn’t look over. “Dave,” Joe said again, louder, and Brian looked over quickly and then looked away. “Two tequila shots.”

Dave looked at Joe and then at Brian and then back at Joe.

“You sure?” he said.

“Oh yeah,” said Joe. Dave brought the shots and Joe took one in each hand, dismounted the barstool he’d been on and walked a few steps to sit next to Brian, sliding one over in front of the kid. Brian seemed like he didn’t know where to look, glancing from his beer to Joe to the shot and up at Dave, not a guy who had a lot of shots bought for him the moment he walked into a bar.

“Drinks are on me,” Joe said. He held his own shot out toward Brian, waiting for a toast.

“What’s the occasion?” Brian said. He didn’t touch the tequila.

“What do we need an occasion for?” Joe asked, spreading his hands wide. “It’s Monday. The Dodgers won. The sun came up. You’re new in town. We’re alive. Pick one.”

Brian frowned a small, polite frown and looked into the glass of tequila he’d been offered, looked like he was about to say something.

“It’s a very small town,” Joe said, leaning nearer to Brian, just a little too close. “We all know when people come and go.”

Dave turned on the sink behind the bar and rinsed clean glasses. Brian sat straight-backed, nervous, beer untouched, while Joe was jovial and expansive, as though this young man was his long-lost best friend.

"You always this friendly to visitors?"

"Absolutely."

Brian made a decision and reached for the tequila and lifted it. Joe clicked their glasses together and they threw the tequila down their throats, sweet and burning. Brian slammed the glass a little too hard on the bar and cleared his throat, shook his head. Joe laughed and slapped him on the back.

"That's the stuff, huh?"

"I don't drink much liquor," Brian said. His smile was embarrassed, self-deprecating. "Wife doesn't like it."

"She here with you?"

"Nah. I came alone."

"That calls for another round, then," said Joe, and he called over Dave for two more shots over Brian's protestations, goaded him into picking up the shot again, tossing it back again.

Joe poured him one more shot. "I'm sunk," he said. "One more and it's my bones'll be out in the desert." Brian drank it on command, his resistance lubricated by the shots he'd already done, by the ease of making new friends in this otherwise alien town.

"So what's so great about this place," Brian said.

"It's the only good bar in town."

"I meant the town."

"Our fair oasis," Joe said. "Well, Dave here likes the riding. The other day he was telling me he can get his hog up to one ten on some of these straightaways."

"I didn't say hog," Dave said.

“Some people like the solitude,” Joe pontificated. He waved one hand in the air. “Some like the good air, the heat, the dry climate. I like it because my people are from here.”

“Your people,” Brian said. He sounded skeptical.

Joe sat up straight on the barstool. “The Morongo,” he said. “My real name is Walks-with-Tortoise.”

Brian said nothing for a moment. “Is that a good thing?” he finally asked.

“Tortoises are revered,” Joe said. “They can live to two hundred.”

“Oh,” said Brian.

“The tortoise was the one who made the desert,” Joe said. Brian was listening, took a drink from his beer finally. “When the earth was new the world was a lake. The birds were tired of flying because there was nowhere to build nests, nowhere to lay eggs, nowhere for them to land except on the back of the turtles sunning themselves in the water. One day the raven landed on one and said, my wings are so tired, I might fall into this water and drown. And the turtle said, this water is so cold, all I want is to come out into the sun and warm my bones. And the raven said, let’s work together, let me see if I can think of something. He goes off and he talks to the other birds, to the fishes, the frogs, and he comes back to that turtle and he says: there’s a plug at the bottom of this lake. You could unplug the lake, just for a little while, we could have the land and still have the water and everyone would be happy.” Joe paused and looked at the back of a hand as if remembering it.

“And the turtle unplugged it forever,” Brian said.

“Raven was supposed to tell him when the lake was the right size, but the raven just flew off. All the water drained. The turtle became the tortoise, not built for dry land but stuck on it. The raven can’t speak anymore, just say back what you say to it. The world is dried up and here we are.”

He had invented Joe, he’d invented Walks-with-Tortoise, he’d invented the desert mythology he told people. He’d been born Miguel Gustavo Diego Garcia, in Echo Park, in Los Angeles. When he moved to Twentynine Palms he’d told people his name was Joe as an experiment, to see if he could shake Miguel off with the city but it had taken a life of its own.

“But why would someone come here,” Brian said. His beer was three-quarters gone.

“It depends on who we’re talking about.”

“Why the storm drain of the world?”

“There’s something good about every place,” Joe said. Dave was at the other end of the bar, scooping cans from a chest refrigerator so he stood and reached over the bar for the tequila bottle, poured him and Brian each another shot, shouted to Dave who waved him off with a hand. “Even here.” Brian shot the tequila and Joe sipped it, the glass held in three fingers.

“I haven’t seen much.”

Joe considered the beer, the tequila, the boy sitting next to him with Annie’s face under his own. He played his hand. “It’s Brian, right?”

“Yeah,” Brian said. He looked confused, surprised, curious, though not suspicious. “Have we met?”

"No," Joe said. Then, "I was friends with your mom."

"Friends." Brian didn't look at him.

"Just friends." Dave looked up. Brian was too drunk to notice, all his attention centered on Joe.

"So tell me something," Brian said. He poured himself more tequila, none for Joe, missing the glass a little, running it over when he didn't stop pouring soon enough, having trouble recorking it. Dave came over and took care of it, put the bottle behind the bar out of reach.

"Tell you what?"

"You were her friend, not me. You choose."

Joe heard the hostility there, recognized the sharp edge to Brian's voice even though he didn't understand it. He closed his eyes and thought as the bar wobbled in front of him, not sure what to tell her kid: that she could remember times and dates with mechanical precision, knew fifty kind of gray rocks apart but lost her sunglasses on top of her own head? That she named the dead things they found out in the desert? That she couldn't abide a mystery, that she loved for things to be found, explained, laid out in plain daylight? That she spent Brian's wedding day crying in her kitchen while Joe made her cup after cup of tea? That he had never been able to bring himself to ask why she wasn't at the wedding?

"She tried to grow a lemon tree in her backyard. They don't grow here but it didn't stop her. She'd water the thing three times a day. When one died, she'd buy another one, water that. It never worked. The last one is probably still there. Probably just a stick in the ground."

“Tell me something else,” Brian said. A tree in the backyard isn’t what I wanted, his face said. He fumbled with the empty shot glass and tipped it over, looked at it, looked back at Joe. “Tell me why this shitty town.”

“It’s not shitty,” Joe said, but he said it without heat, in the same tone of voice to comment on unexciting weather. The kid was right, but she’d still chosen the town him. Something like that. There was really only one thing to tell the kid, one story.

“You want to hear a story she liked?” he asked.

“No.”

Joe shrugged. “It’s what I’ve got,” he said.

Brian’s shoulders went down. He was still playing with he shot glass, flicking it so it spun on its side on the bar. “Fine,” he said.

* * *

It was a relief to just tell the story, to feel the words coming out that he knew how to corral. Joe felt like a vessel, like a riverbed, like one of these deep desert gorges that are dry except during cloudbursts when they direct the rush of water down and out of the mountains, shaped themselves by the water.

The Celestial, he began. He paused. The Celestial was a man, he was born in China a hundred years ago. A hundred and thirty. Celestial was a racial slur then because China called itself the Celestial Empire and we, America, found that ridiculous. The name stuck better than his own name, though. We don’t know it. I call him Chang. He wouldn’t have appreciated being remembered by a slur.

He was born in a dirt hut by a river, in a dirt village, in a dirt province, with willow trees so thick you couldn't see the river from the house. It was a small world. Life there plodded on like always, at least until the railroad men came through, looking for labor. They offered Chang and his brothers a free trip to America, first-class accommodations across the Pacific and California, in exchange for a few years of work on the railroad. Once his time was done, he could strike out on his own. Every table in America was loaded to breaking, every woman young and blushing, every house three stories tall and wide as five huts. Streets paved with silver. Trash heaps piled high with imperfect jewels. You know how stories are. Chang and his younger brother didn't know not to believe it, so they went.

They crossed the ocean sleeping in wet hammocks on the lowest deck. At the San Francisco docks, they got off the ship and barely glimpsed the city before they were loaded onto a train, hot and crowded with all the other Chinese going to the same place. They headed south, then east, then south, they changed trains a couple of times, packed into boxcars with no windows, sleeping on the floor as they clanged across the tracks, never getting to see the vast land they crossed. When the train tracks ran out the men were loaded into horse drawn carts and taken then rest of the way, and that's when they saw where they had got to for the first time.

Joe waved a vague hand at the door, the windows, the ceiling. No willow trees here, he said.

They went to work on the railroads, Chang and his brother together. They ate together, they slept in a tent together. They dug together, they hammered together, here in this strange place which looked nothing like the wide muddy banks of their youth, they at

least had each other. It's good to have a kindred spirit when you're somewhere you don't understand and you wonder if you've made a terrible mistake, someone who can reassure you that sun is sun and dirt is dirt and you didn't just invent everything in some sort of fever dream.

Joe paused. He flattened his hand on the table and studied his big knuckles for a long time before going on.

Then they hit the mountains and they learned they'd be going through and not over. Going through meant blasting through, blowing up the insides of a mountain and hoping the whole thing didn't fall in. They'd just got nitroglycerin, and handling it fell to Chang and his brother. You know how this part of the story goes. One day, Chang's brother slid a tube of nitro into a blast hole and it blew.

Chang was outside and he didn't know. Even when he heard the blast he didn't know, he just thought his brother had already come out of the tunnel and lit the fuse even though they hadn't finished. He still didn't know when the other workers started running out of the cave, as another blast went and another. He thought his brother was one of the men running, one of the ones safely out of the tunnel, but he couldn't find his face anywhere. Even when he was running into the tunnel, even when he was shouting his brother's name and no one was answering, even when he saw the halo of viscera ringed around the tunnel, he was sure it wasn't his brother. The brain refuses to hear bad news, sometimes. Those long moments of disbelief when the worst happens and you're so certain it hasn't. So when he reached the pile of rubble, red and slick, when the other men rushed in with shovels shouting in Cantonese and Mandarin and English, Chang just stood there. He knew his brother would come out of a dark corner, and say, oh there you

are. That was a bad one. He knew they'd go eat together, go sleep in the same tent again, wake up the next day and inch the tunnel along.

By now, Dave had stopped pretending to wash clean glasses or wipe down a spotless bar. He stood, leaning against the back wall, listening.

He didn't. In the lantern light the tunnel was twenty feet longer than it had been, misshapen, the left half deeper than the right. There's a lot of stuff inside us, a lot of red. Someone vomited and the sound echoed, but no one turned to look.

Chang landed on his knees and began scraping together the bits of blood, flesh and bones strewn across the floor, slashing his own hands, like if he got enough together he could animate it back into a person. Like he thought his brother might need those missing pieces. All the Chinese workers watched as he crawled around, making this neat pile, until, someone finally stepped forward, hauled Chang up, shook him. Took him out to the sunlight, near covered in blood and viscera, the dirt of the day under the layer of red, the knees of his trousers torn straight through. The others did what they could, shoveled the rest of his brother into a bucket.

The nitro didn't leave much for Chang to bury, just pieces, nothing to suggest the person he'd been. Tibias and femurs in pieces. An eyeball. Splinters of his ribs. Teeth, some hair, one complete hand. Chang climbed the mountain the next morning in the early light, the splendor of the world around him, didn't feel a thing. He poured his brother into a hole without crying because deep in his animal brain, he still didn't believe it. He still thought he'd go down the mountain and he'd be standing there. Before he covered the grave, he took a vertebra, still covered in blood, nerves dangling, and put it in his pocket. He had a vague idea that they could be buried together, wherever that might be.

Joe's eyes were fixed on a point just beyond the wooden bar. He lifted a hand to his face, moving like he was underwater, and scratched a sideburn, passing his palm over his mouth, stretching his jaw, never looking up.

Chang left the camp that night. He found he couldn't stay in the place where his brother had died, where everything he did he did with his ghost, so he set off into the desert. He didn't know where he was going, but he thought that anywhere would be better than seeing his brother everywhere he looked.

He walked all night and slept during the day, walked, slept, walked. The vertebra in his pocket, blood and nerves dried, the stars overhead strange. He tried to find the familiar constellations in them for comfort and couldn't, so he made up his own as they wheeled across the sky. The locomotive, the tumbleweed, the tortoise, the railroad spike, the dead man. When the sun sneaked up behind him that third dawn and the stars faded, on the horizon was the burnt out shell. The chimney was still standing, along with some of the walls, a piece of the roof, a piece of the floor, and Chang arranged some tar paper into a lean-to against the chimney and slept out of the sun as best he could. He finished his food and his water, and that night, as he was about to leave the house, the light dying, he bumped a loose brick in the chimney. There was a map behind it. Two mountain ranges, the top a short dash, the bottom one longer, curving around the east side of the top one. A line going off at an angle above. Dotted across the paper, some uninterpretable symbol: poorly drawn squiggles, tiny explosions at the end of each line. In the lower right corner, an X. Chang believed that the dead still care for us, that they look after us, that sometimes they can breach the barrier between us and reach out a hand, and he believed that this map was from his brother, that if he followed it he'd survive, find his way out of

this wasteland. So he took his bearings as best he could and set out. He made New Providence by morning, a silver boomtown, half-dead and raving.

Joe cleared this throat and shifted his weight.

Years went by in New Providence. Chang did what men do in bad circumstances and made the best of them. He learned English, learned mining, learned not to talk about his dead brother. He turned quiet and maniacal, went out for days that became weeks, looking for the X on that map. Grief and the desert had transfigured him into someone with his own beliefs, his own faith in omens and signs. Chang saw the dead everywhere. He thought they led him safe through villainy of white men and through the dry mountains. He spoke with them freely, in public or private. He went everywhere with his brother's backbone. Eventually he got to New Dale, and he found the Joshua Trees, he realized they were the strange figures on the map. And he disappeared into the desert.

It's harder to know what happened then, Joe said. But the hut where he lived had three walls made of adobe and one backed up against a mountain. It had a door that closed and a window with no glass, sometimes hung with burlap, sometimes not. He spent all day chasing after that map, convinced by now that the X stood at the portal to the next world where he could haul his brother out. By night he sat out in the open talking to ghosts under the stars he'd named.

And, after some years, he turned up in New Dale and bought everyone at the saloon whiskey with a gold nugget. Tipped the bartender with another, just as mad as when he went into the desert, still talking to ghosts, and then he disappeared again for years. He'd found the mine and kept looking for the portal; if he knew the story of the Spanish and the Indians and El Cañon, he never mentioned it in the hearing of any living

person. People started trying to follow him but they got lost. People asked where the mine was and got nonsense directions.

One day, he walked into town, raving worse than usual, the vertebra held so tightly in one hand that his palm bled and dripped into the dust. When he fell over in the middle of the street the people found he had a high fever and took him into bed, thinking there'd be a reward whether he pulled through or not. He spent a week raving, sometimes in Mandarin and sometimes about the shack beneath the locomotive, east of the tortoise with the dead man rising. The people wrote down every word he said, thinking in his delirium he'd tell them where the mine was.

Joe put a fist to his chest and belched, went quiet.

"Well?" asked Brian, finally.

"Chang died," Joe said. "His deathbed nurse drew up a map to sell."

"That's a terrible story," Brian said.

"I must have told it to her thirty times."

"What for?"

Joe studied Brian for a moment, the young man swimming in his vision, his forehead in his hand. "You don't know," he said.

"What don't I know."

"She was looking for it."

"The portal?"

"The mine."

Brian looked at Joe, hand still on his forehead like he was trying to anchor himself to the bar. "You're fucking kidding," he said.

"It's east of town," Joe said. "Probably. She had all the maps."

"I'm leaving," Brian said. He got off the stool and stood unsteadily, stepped toward the velvet curtain at the door.

"Come on," said Joe. I was with her the last day, he wanted to say, but instead he stood as well and toppled to the floor.

"Jesus," muttered Dave. He came around the bar. No one else was still at the Cactus. Brian came back and together they hauled Joe to his feet.

* * *

In the end, Dave, sobered up, drove Joe's pickup truck and took the drunks home. Brian sat in the cab, holding onto the dashboard with his left hand and the Jesus handle with his right for the five-minute drive back to the motel. Joe they poured into the truck bed because he could barely stand.

"I'll take him to my place," Dave said. "He's had a bad weekend." That was all they said.

In the back of the truck Joe laid on his back and watched the sky, the orbs of the streetlight passing overhead, the power lines, the stoplights. The truck bed was cold and metal, the truck from the 1980s. He'd never gotten around to putting a liner in it, and the cold of the aluminum soaked through his shirt and jeans. He felt Miguel resurface, a whale coming up for air, as he watched the sky roll by, traffic lights, power lines. The first time he'd seen the desert, twelve years old in Anza-Borrego, the sun like god himself smiling down. At night a black sky with pinpricks of light, the earth stretching out in all directions with no people, no cars, no buildings, pure nothing for as far as he could see. Miguel had never particularly liked the city, but at twelve, didn't know what else there

was, but right then he knew the desert was home. Miguel never married, but he stayed near his family in the city for most of his life. Nearly every weekend he headed for the desert. No one was really surprised when, at fifty, parents gone, he sold the shop and left for some town they'd never heard of.

He bought a cabin in the Mojave, in the expanse east of Twentynine Palms, the long undulating area between town and the Arizona border. In the desert, no one knew who he was, who his parents or grandparents or aunts or uncles or siblings were. The weight of his family disappeared from his shoulders, and his promises to visit once a month became every other month, every three months. His tan deepened. He started drawing, mostly landscape sketches, and found he could lose an afternoon in contemplating the angles of a mountain peak. No one knew he wasn't really Joe, ceremonial name Walks-With-Tortoise; no one realized he invented the Cholla band of Morongo Indians. He found a talent for storytelling, for spinning yarns on the spot, for inventing an entire mythology for a fake people. He discovered that he had the memory to keep everything straight.

He met Annie when she was new in town, still reeling from something she'd barely talk about. Annie who wanted to hear every story he told twice, who couldn't help but delve into the story of the mine and find it might be half-true, who began looking for it as a distraction that grew into an obsession. Annie who didn't want to be his lover but who he secretly, in the dark recesses of his heart, thought might be his soulmate anyway.

Dave drove up to his house, let down the tailgate, slid Joe out and just about carried him in. He slept on his side, on a couch with an empty trash can next to his face.

He woke up with the sun blasting through the front windows, seven a.m., in the muddy land between drunk and hungover.

"Got any bacon?" he asked Dave when he thumped into the kitchen.

"I'm not your mother," Dave said.

"Thanks," said Joe.

CHAPTER FOUR

Then, everything calmed down again, and Julie wasn't sure she liked that either. She didn't really need the stress of Tommy shouting about gang warfare, but she had to admit it spiced up her life. The CVS seemed dead quiet, not even teenagers whispering to each other in the douche section or, worse, talking loudly next to the condoms about what size they needed. The weather in Twentynine Palms hardly ever changed so people attuned themselves to the subtle changes in sunlight, to the flatter days and the days when shadows seemed deeper, somehow. They knew when the humidity was almost high enough to be livable and when it dove into single digits, wildfire weather, not that there was much to burn. The fire weather made people quieter, more self-aware, more conscious of the space they walked through. Everything felt like waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When Julie got off work the dome light was on her in car. She didn't remember leaving it that way, but there it was, glowing a weak orange. The battery had been dodgy lately, taking longer and longer to start, but Julie thought that she could will battery over

the edge, just this one time. The engine whinnied when she turned the key, and then again, and then again, so she gave up.

Right beyond her car a young man in shorts and a polo shirt and sneakers had come over, standing uncertainly, attracted by the noise. He held a plastic CVS bag lightly, just a couple items in it.

"You need a jump?" he asked as soon as he was out of the car.

"I work here," she said. "I'll get someone inside to give me a jump."

"I've got nowhere to be," he said.

He wasn't bad looking, Julie thought. On the tall side, younger than her, in shape. Handled the CVS bag delicately, like he was afraid of ripping the handle off. Vaguely familiar face, like she'd seen him somewhere once before, a long time ago. Wedding ring, so it could be he was just a do-gooder, a nice guy who liked to help out women in tough spots without expecting anything for it.

"Thanks," Julie said.

He drove over in a big white Jeep, parked next to her little Corolla in an empty spot.

"You leave the lights on?" he asked as they unfurled his jumper cables.

"Just the dome light. It was on all day, though, and the battery's been dying." Julie checked that the rubber was good on the clamps, snapping them together. "I've really gotta replace it."

"How old?"

"About ten years. It's an '01. I put this on my car first?"

"Right. You know cars?" He hooked both ends of the cable to his battery. He had a nice smile, even more familiar than his face.

"I've sure had enough shitty ones to know how to jump them," she said. She clamped the final jaw onto her car's frame and leaned over her engine as though she were trying to double-check the connection, looking at his face from a different angle, wishing it weren't so dark and the light from the CVS and the far-away parking lot lights wasn't so dim and shadowy.

"You good?"

She gave him a thumbs up. He stepped over the cables carefully, climbed into the Jeep, started it, got back out with the engine still running. Something about him kept pricking at the back of Julie's mind, and she felt the first warmth of panic deep inside, the worry that she had met him somewhere in the poorly-lit, overcrowded past, the worry that he knew her better than she him. She pushed back against the panic. Don't be stupid, she thought.

"Give it a minute to juice up first," he said.

"I don't think we've met before," she said. "I'm Julie." She held out her hand.

"Brian," he said, taking it, and then, Julie recognized his car from the morning news and everything clicked together.

"You're Annie's son," she said.

He gave her an uncertain look. "Yeah," he said.

"You look just like her."

"Apparently."

It had been the wrong thing to say. "Sorry," Julie said. "I didn't mean to pry."

“It’s a little weird to be recognized somewhere you’ve never been before,” Brian said.

“It was the car,” Julie said. “It made the front page of the Star. I’m so sorry about your mom.”

“Thanks,” said Brian.

The cars chugged, and Julie felt him looking at her. She watched the CVS through the windows, two people standing in line by a barrel full of travel-sized hand sanitizers. He was young, she thought, younger than she’d thought on first seeing him. Young enough to really be alone out here. Young enough to miss his mom.

“I met her a few times,” Julie said. Brian said nothing but she saw his interest focus on her. If he’d been an animal, his ears would have pricked up. “She talked about you.” It was an impulsive lie.

“What did she say?”

“She was proud of you,” Julie said. She watched Brian carefully. “She worried about you, being so far away from her.” Careful, this is dicey.

Brian pressed his lips together and looked away. Something wasn’t right here, Julie thought.

“She missed you,” she said.

He didn’t look at her.

“I didn’t know her all that well, to be honest,” she backtracked. She looked for better footing. “She used to volunteer in Joshua Tree and give geology talks. I went on a few when I first moved here, and I mentioned I was new to town. One day she came into

the CVS with a little cactus in a plastic pot and said it was a housewarming present for me, named Nadine. She did stuff like that. Kind of an oddball, but nice."

"Nadine? Did you keep it?"

"Of course," Julie said. "It's in my kitchen window."

Brian nodded at the cars. "You're probably good," he said. She walked back to her car, carefully gripped the rubber and undid the clamps. They snapped closed. Julie handed Brian the two cables and brushed her fingers against his as she did.

"Let me buy you a drink sometime," she said.

"Oh, no need," said Brian.

"Come on," Julie said, and she smiled. "Just a friendly thank you for giving me a hand. Nothing else. You're here for a bad reason, have a little fun."

Brian hesitated.

"Give me your number," Julie said, pulling out her phone. He did. Then he got in his car and drove away looking consternated, like he'd done something wrong but didn't know quite what or how. Julie stood still and watched him drive off, the ungainly white car wallowing onto the highway and then sliding away like an ice cube. She unlatched the prop on her hood and let it slam down so it would lock, then got into her car, still running. For a long time she watched the brick wall of the CVS out of her windshield and thought, then she put the Corolla in gear and drove in the opposite direction from Brian.

* * *

Home was four vertical walls, a flat roof, all the same tan color as the dirt it stood on, big plate glass windows on every side, yucca plants in a row along the front, a thick wooden door with a wrought iron handle and a small window that looked like it could

have been built by the Spanish when they came through. She had fallen in love with the place right away: it was small, it was cheap, she had no neighbors. The house had been a model home for a planned housing development a few years before when building endless lookalike houses in the deep desert seemed like a good idea, but they'd never gotten further than the model house and even that had never been painted on the outside, never had a fence or a driveway put in. The builders and the owners were in endless legal battles between bankruptcy and trying to find someone who wanted to buy a hundred acres of useless desert, and were happy enough to have one woman paying a little rent while they fought. Julie figured she'd have moved on from both herself and Twentynine Palms before they got around to figuring something out.

There was a spot in the desert around Julie's house that she thought of a driveway, a spot she considered her front yard, a worn path she considered her front walk. She'd had a carport for a little while, one made of aluminum that she'd bought from Home Depot and put up herself but it blew away in a windstorm, leaving nothing but a long vertical scratch on her car. She'd gone looking for it but it never turned up and after a while she assumed it shared the same fate as everything else abandoned in the desert, the cars, the shacks, the swimming pools, that somewhere she couldn't find was a rusting carport wedged belly-up between two rocks, legs broken off and scattered. When it had happened Julie had been surprised that she could lose something as big as a carport but now, a year and change later, she understood better the nature of the place and was surprised she ever found anything that went missing.

On the inside she didn't spoil the austere desert feeling with too much: a TV, a couch, a bed in the bedroom, a few boxes in the other two rooms. Try not to have much

more than you can take with you, she'd learned, and don't let what you leave behind tell people who you are. Don't keep books around, buy them, give them to Goodwill. No library accounts. Her couch could have been anyone's couch, the bed anyone's bed. She bought posters from Ikea just to put something on the walls, all the walls that weren't window: a skylight in the bathroom, big plate glass windows in the living room, a sliding glass door into the backyard, light pouring in from every direction. People here lived close to the sun, thought of it more as a friendly neighbor than a celestial body, a constant presence they never questioned. The sun was someone they invited in casually every morning for coffee, someone they saw around town at the grocery store or the gas station or the bar, someone with whom they occasionally quarreled but whose place in their life they accepted. They lived shoulder to shoulder.

Julie kept thick blackout curtains over every window. She had lived with the desert sun all her life. It was there in her first memory: three years old, maybe four, alone in the massive desert, ugly in the flat midday sun, quiet and still and empty. The memory was only a few seconds long and contained nothing but simple blank terror and silence and sun, though Julie knew the story from her mother. They had gone for a walk, she had wandered behind an outcropping for a moment, her mother had come along seconds later. She couldn't pinpoint when exactly in her girlhood she'd moved from terror to solace in the desert, when she'd shed the fear of being alone and lost and begun to relish the idea that no one, not her sisters or her parents or possibly even God himself, knew where she had gotten to. Keeping the curtains down replicated the feeling weakly.

Besides, they kept the heat tolerable and they kept eyes out. When she flicked on the lights after getting home from work, the yellow barely leaked out around the edges,

so from the distance her house looked like squares of fire drawn onto the desert, possibly unsafe, possibly alien. She turned on the TV as a matter of course, already on the travel channel. A man punted a boat down a crowded, colorful river in a city in Asia or Africa or maybe South America, certainly somewhere Julie had never been. He droned on about the gift-giving custom in this culture as Julie pulled leftovers out of her fridge, microwaved a bowl of chili, made herself a salad and sat down at the kitchen table. It was Bangkok.

After dinner she put the dishes away and the food back in the fridge, made tea and washed her face, settled into the couch under a blanket. Lately she'd been watching a lot of old movies, the kind of that advertised FILMED IN TECHNICOLOR and had a cast of hundreds, mostly dancers who appeared to be in the background of a musical number and then faded away again. Anything with Gene Kelly or Fred Astraire. Tonight *The Ziegfield Follies* was on, a little older than what she usually went for, but she watched happily.

It was pure escapism. Julie knew it. She had escaped to here, and now she was escaping from it with everything she did: drinking, the travel channel, shutting the desert out of her house and acting as if the sun had no place in her life, watching these movies that existed in a world where people communicated via song. She watched shapely women diving off the edge of a pool one by one, each looking like the last, and finally she considered Brian. Young men separated easily from their money, confident in the belief that what had come once could come again; young men with windfalls, money unspent so far, separated even more easily. He'd volunteered to help her and wanted nothing in return. He didn't even want her to buy him a drink. That look on his face when he touched his hand, a jackrabbit in her headlights, ready to bolt, and if she had to guess

she'd say college sweethearts, high school maybe. What did she not give him, Julie thought. There was always something.

Years ago, out of the blue, Jefferson had told her that people married whoever they were with when they got tired of looking for someone. They'd been on some winery tour, posing as married, her name Stephanie then and his Clint, and the rest of the tour had exited the room before the two of them as they stood looking at the big steel tanks, Julie/Stephanie thinking of how a tidal wave of half-fermented wine could carry them out of there, through the rest of the winery, out to the vineyards and down the mountain, when Jefferson/Clint had spoken up out of nowhere. He had done that sort of thing, always dropping nuggets of advice at odd times, and she'd learned not to read too much into it.

Women in skintight gold costumes spun and dove on the TV. Someone she didn't recognize sang a love song. When she first moved to town, she'd given out that she had come off a bad divorce and she didn't want to talk about it, just needed some time to heal, and people had mostly understood and left her alone. It was good to have a project, though.

CHAPTER FIVE

After CVS, Brian made two stops on the way to Annie's house: one at the 7-11, where he got a six pack of Sam Adams, the best beer they had, and one at Domino's where he got a large double-pepperoni pizza. Michelle wasn't drinking at the moment and didn't think Brian should be drinking either, and she was on some sort of health kick where she didn't eat bread. He minded the bread thing less than the drinking, since it meant she was doing all the cooking, something he'd never been excited to do in the first place. They'd texted back and forth a little since he got to Twentynine Palms two days ago, mostly nonsense like "Miss you" and "It's hot down here" and "<3 <3."

He put the pizza on Annie's formica kitchen table without bothering to move the maps and cracked a beer. The kitchen felt stuffy, and the horned skull in the window watched him as he ate his first slice, then picked up his second and his beer and went to sit on the steps at the side of the house that led to the door by the kitchen, in the house's shadow this time of day. Beyond the chain link fence was another house, almost the same house as this one, with a wooden structure out back containing a snoozing dog. Beyond

that another fence, a house dwarfed by the RV behind it, easily the size of a bus, shades in every window, gleaming in the sun, new and probably worth more than the house. He tried to imagine the sort of decisionmaking that led to that circumstance, a game he played sometimes with himself. This time he decided on a sleazy salesman and buyers who had really wanted something smaller but got talked into that behemoth instead. How long did something like that last out here, in the sun like that? Didn't the tires rot, the interior fade, the paint peel off?

First beer finished, he stood and went back into the kitchen, put the six pack into the fridge and opened his second. Two beers and it wasn't even four yet, no wonder people went on about the bachelor life, though he'd seen bachelor apartments and really didn't feel like he was missing much. Sometimes Michelle got to him—Brian absolutely hated the triptych of cheesy black and white wedding photos that hung over their mantle, his objections to which had been ignored—but he had multiple sets of sheets, glasses made of actual glass, dressers for his clothes instead of two questionable piles. He had way more sex than any single guy he knew, especially now, and though he had only a minor college transgression or two to compare it with, which Michelle didn't know about, the sex was pretty good.

Beer in hand, Brian went into Annie's living room looking for an AC. He thought of everything that way: Annie's house, Annie's kitchen, Annie's table, Annie's fridge. It was easier to think, I'm getting out of bed now and going to Annie's house, I'm throwing away all the stuff from Annie's house, I'm going to clean Annie's house and get rid of her stuff and then sell it and leave. It was what everyone here called her, and if he did too,

he felt like he was one of them. It made him someone who fit in instead of what he felt like, a northerner in a snow globe filled with sand, the people of the town looking in.

The AC unit was just a wall unit, sticking out into the side wall, half-hidden by one of the bookshelves filled with taxidermied animals and bones, behind a solid five feet of papers stacked chest-high, newspapers, sheet paper that looked typewritten, blueprints, books, topographic maps piled here and there. He put his beer on the bookshelf next to an unidentified small mammal who watched him with glass eyes, and put a knee on the pile, tried to climb up but slid off with a small paper avalanche. He tried again on a different part of the pile with the same result, then came back with a kitchen chair, tried to lean across, tried to walk across, and minutes later finally succeeded in slithering across on his belly, toes anchored on the kitchen chair. The AC spat dust into his face and he wiped it on his shirt then laid there on the papers for a moment, thinking that there was no way Annie'd ever turned the AC on. He thought less of his mother with nearly every minute he spent in her house, a cinderblock heat trap filled with treacherous piles of flammable material, never dusted, the AC never on, dead animals everywhere. She'd managed to get hit by the only car on a deserted highway, a car she should have seen from a hundred miles away. Giving away cacti was all right, it made her seem like a nice person, but everything else left him unimpressed.

There was another level to Brian's thinking at all time, submerged under his conscious where he thought all the things he didn't want to think. Here, he wondered if she'd committed suicide, because what else explained that sort of death? It was the same place where he knew that Michelle loved him more than he loved her, that she was a woman who'd come along a few years after Annie disappeared from his life, and he

loved that she wanted him in her future, that she approached their relationship with the kind of zeal a mother should have. Until he came to Twentynine Palms, that submerged self was the self who'd been afraid that she hadn't left for somewhere glamorous like he'd always told himself, for Paris or Rome or Tokyo, but that she'd just left for anywhere that wasn't Ukiah, that wasn't with him and his father. And then he'd gotten here, and that secret fear had exploded into truth.

Brian tried to organize the piles in front of the AC for the rest of his second beer before realizing he had no system better than the current one, no way of organizing piles that wasn't worse than what Annie had done. He needed a trash can big enough for all this, or better, a dumpster. A fire pit, even.

* * *

Two more beers later Brian had decided it was best to just do inventory at this stage. He wished, a little, that Michelle were there because she'd know what to do. She'd look at this firetrap of a house and say, well, we can throw this out, this goes here, this goes here, we'll put an accent rug by this door, toss the rocks in the backyard and look, good as new, and all Brian would have to do would be follow her direction. It was a dynamic he'd grown accustomed to over the past two years as they worked on their house, but instead, he was wandering around the house, pants and shirt shed one beer ago, AC going full-blast and barely making a dent, pushing aside papers to reveal more papers, crunching over the fine grit that seemed to cover every floor. There was a roll-top desk filled with Southern California guidebooks, atlases, some sort of box with a mountain in relief on top, filled with wooden bits, maps printed on a printer that had clearly been running low on one or more colors. One drawer was full to the brim with

3x5 pictures of sandstone boulders, or maybe it was one boulder from different angles, he couldn't fucking tell. One thousand pictures of some rock or rocks.

When he tried to take the tin foil off the front windows he speared himself on a cactus; not five minutes later he touched another of the plants, one covered with dense white fur, just to see what it was, but now his left pointer finger was swollen and raw and he realized that the fur-covered plants had also had spines, tiny ones now lodged in his skin. For a moment he considered the life lessons in this, that even cuddly-looking cacti hurt, maybe worse than the spiky ones, and then he went to go see if Annie had tweezers in her bathroom.

She didn't, at least not in the medicine cabinet where most people kept their tweezers, not that Annie was most people. Clearly. Aside from an overflowing magazine rack, bottles and bottles of expired, faded prescriptions and a basket full of flower-shaped soaps that were nauseatingly perfumed, the bathroom wasn't too bad. The bathroom, Brian thought, might even be doable in an afternoon once he had some sort of supplies to do it with. There was nothing under the sink besides a hair dryer and a large plastic box filled with short cylinders that he assumed was something feminine.

Then, someone knocked on the door, rattling the screen against its frame.

"Just a minute," Brian shouted, as he ran back into the kitchen to get his pants and shirt from the dining table. He came to the door trying to get the collar of his shirt to lay flat and opened it onto the woman whose car he'd jumped, holding a large aluminum tray in front of her.

"Hi," he said.

She lifted the tray a few inches toward him. “I wanted to come pay my respects,” she said.

“Oh,” Brian said. With one hand he was still trying to get his collar to go right, but it kept popping back up and rubbing the back of his neck, bristling the short hairs there.

“It’s inside out,” Julie said.

Brian looked down at his shoulder, saw the seam. “Right,” he said. He remembered his manners. “Can I invite you in?” he asked. He felt his wedding ring with his left thumb, reassured himself that it was on today. Sometimes he took it off to exercise or shower and forgot to put it back on.

“Thanks,” she said. Brian opened the screen door, leaning out from the threshold as she came in around him, shoulder just grazing his chest. “It’s tamales.”

She stopped in front of him, looked around at the house, then over her shoulder. “The kitchen’s straight ahead,” he said, and she held the tray out a few inches so she could see her feet as she picked her way through the hall.

“What’s with the rocks?” she asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he said. “For anything.”

When they reached the kitchen he he tugged his shirt off and put it back on correctly. He couldn’t be sure but thought he felt her watching. She had her hair down today, bangs that swept across her face, wearing a shirt and jeans that suited her better than her uniform had yesterday. She looked different in this light, her face easier as she set her tray on the counter and then leaned against it, smiling.

“Sorry to just drop in,” she said. “I saw the car outside and figured you were here.”

Brian nodded at the counter. “Did you make those?”

She laughed. “Not these,” she said. “They’re from Maria’s, up near the high school. They’re better than mine.”

“I’m sure yours are pretty good.”

“They are, but I’m out of practice.”

Brian touched his wedding ring with his thumb again. “Can I get you a drink?” he asked.

“I’d love one.”

He opened the fridge: one Sam Adams left, some mustard, eggs, bread, a couple cartons of juice in the back. He probably should have thrown those out when he tossed the other perishables, but somehow juice seemed like something that didn’t go bad. What was the worst orange juice would do, ferment? Then it was just orange wine. He opened the beer and handed it to Julie.

“Thanks,” she said, and held it up, waited. Brian grabbed his and touched them together. “To Annie,” she said.

“To Annie,” he echoed. If she thought it was odd that he used her first name, she didn’t say anything.

“So I’ve got this coworker,” she said. “She’s a little, I don’t know, out there, but she’s positive that Annie bought this house because it was over the shaft to the Celestial Mine.”

Brian stared.

"Dumb, right?"

"She thinks it's what?"

"The mine Annie was looking for."

"That was true?"

Julie frowned and Brian told her about the other night, where he'd gone to that one dive bar out on 62, where he'd met this Indian guy who said he knew his mom and kept pouring him tequila and told him some long, weird story about a Chinese man who found a mine near here. "I mean, I believed him at the time, but I did like six shots. I'd believe anything after six shots, you know?"

She took a long pull. "He wasn't lying," she said. "About your mom. The mine thing is an old story. Who knows if it's true. But Joe and your mom were like this," she said, and she held up her right hand, two fingers crossed.

"He said they weren't."

Julie shrugged. "I don't know if they were fucking," she said. "Or, romantic. Involved. Sorry. But they were together all the time. They were camping the day she died."

"He was there?"

"Not when she—not when the accident happened. Nobody was there."

"Except the other driver."

"Right."

They paused for a long moment. Brian had his left elbow on the table and clasped his chin in his hand, staring hard at the kitchen wall. "He didn't say anything about that."

Julie told him what she'd heard: the backpacking trip, the hand, the quest for the mine. "People will say crazy shit," she said. "This woman at work is convinced that Will and Annie both found the mine and the Curse of the Celestial got them, and that's why they're both dead, but she also tells me when my aura's looking off and explains bad news according to which planets are in retrograde, so you can take her with a grain of salt."

Brian finished his beer and placed the empty bottle on the formica table next to the ziploc bag of her belongings he'd gotten from the San Bernardino Sherriff, labeled "back seat." It had a comb and a sock in it, and it had told him absolutely nothing about where she'd been going or what she'd been doing on the highway at one o'clock in the morning.

"Rumor has it that she and Joe found the mine," he said, looking at the sock as if addressing himself to it. "And now she's dead." He looked over at Julie. She went wide-eyed.

"Oh, no," she said. "I wasn't saying that. Joe would never—" she paused, stuck, shook her head. "Do anything," she finished.

"She left my dad and me when I was thirteen," he said. Julie stood still and said nothing. Brian looked at her and then into the middle distance, somewhere near the fridge. "She went to a geology conference in Seattle and didn't come back. I haven't even heard from her since then. Eleven years."

"Jesus," said Julie.

"I thought it was me for a long time. It was right after I'd had my first wet dream and I thought she'd just been so disgusted that she left." Brian couldn't look up at her and

watched the light glide across his wedding ring instead, his palm down on the table, flexing and lifting his fingers.

"I'm sure that wasn't it," Julie said.

"It sounds stupid now," he said.

"She talked about you like everything was normal," Julie said. She put her beer on the counter and planted both her hands on it, behind her, gripping its edge. The tamales steamed, aluminum lid askew. "Not that I really knew her. But, I'd see her around, and say, how's your son, and she'd say oh, they bought a house, it's really lovely, back up in the woods off the road, it's a fixer-upper but his wife does interior design so it's good for them."

"She said that?"

"I'm paraphrasing."

Brian stood, took his beer bottle to the trash can, looked out the window with the skull in it. How the hell had she known about the house in the woods, about Michelle's job? Who had she been talking to in Ukiah and why wasn't it him? Was he really that bad? And who in Ukiah thought it was a good idea for him to only find out about her after she was dead, when he was left to pick through her mostly worthless possessions in a cinderblock house in this hellscape?

The skull looked up at him and he stuck one thumb through an eye socket. He heard Julie behind him.

"I'm sorry," she said, putting one hand on his shoulder and then her face was right there, twelve, maybe eighteen inches from his own, her irises were so dark he could

barely tell them from the pupil and her eyes were wide-set, her cheekbones like a horizontal line across her face. He tried to think of Michelle's face.

"It's not your fault," he said. Her hand stayed. "I don't usually tell people all that."

"This must be hard," she said. He pulled his thumb from the animal's skull and his ring clicked softly against bone. The dog next door was still asleep in its roof-only doghouse. The RV in the yard beyond shone orange. The sunset was out of view but the desert looked totally different under its gaze, like it had somehow popped into life since the last time he looked out the window.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said. He tapped a finger against the skull. "I don't even know the logistics of it. My grandparents died when I was a kid and I was too young to pay attention, I just showed up in a suit and cried. I have no idea what happened to a funeral, to their stuff, their will, any of it. I've never had anyone die before."

"Everyone does this for a first time," Julie said. "You're an only child?"

Brian nodded.

"Was Annie?"

"Her brother died in the eighties. Car wreck," he said. "God, that's weird."

"That's easier, though. Now everything's up to you." She took her hand from his shoulder and leaned against the wall, hands in her pockets.

"I think it would be easier with a sibling," said Brian, still staring out the window.

"No one will fight with you about anything."

"I guess."

"When my grandmother died, my father got into a huge fight with his brothers and sisters. There were seven of them, and so everyone was in some alliance with someone else, and these factions were always changing. He'd he on the phone until all hours of the night, telling one brother how his little sister was a money-grubber who wanted more money because their parents had given someone else a car when he was nineteen and living at home, but she had moved out younger and gotten nothing, or telling his older sister that some brother had always been the favorite and that was why *he* got the father's watch. It was a mess. Some of them still don't speak."

"Well, everything you see here is mine now," said Brian, waving his hand toward the kitchen, the house beyond. "Nobody's fighting me for these piles of shit."

"It's all worth something," Julie said.

Brian shrugged. The desert was turning purple and blue outside, the light sliding off of the RV, leaching out of the mountaintops. He checked the clock on the microwave.

"I'm going to head back to the motel," he said.

"You're not staying here?"

"Too weird," he said.

"Do you need a ride?" She moved to the counter and put the tamales in the fridge.

"It's a short drive."

"Thanks for the beer," she said. "Now I owe you two."

"I'll hold you to that," he said.

"I hope so," she said. "Listen. Call if you need anything." She took his shoulder in her hand again, looked up at his face, not far away at all.

Without thinking, Brian went to take her hand with his and then stopped mid-air. He stuck like that a moment, suddenly unclear on the protocols of platonic friendship, feeling like there was a spotlight on the two of them, alone in Annie's kitchen. He brushed the back of her hand with his fingers and she let him go. She left through the side door.

* * *

Instead he turned on all the lights in the house, cleared the table in the living room and laid maps out on it. Took it all in. It made sense that she had all this if she'd been looking for something, and it also made sense that it was a stupid gold mine; before she'd left she'd been a geologist up in Ukiah and Brian hadn't paid much attention to her job—something with government mining permits, he thought now—and he didn't want to believe that she'd spent her years after leaving him looking for something from a stupid story, but parts fit together. There was a rough map on the wall that looked drawn in crayon on butcher paper, and for an hour, he matched the printed maps to the USGS to what looked like torn atlas pages. Some she'd drawn on, some looked like they'd been in a drawer forever, some were folded and soft to the touch like she'd carried them with her for months. Half of what was there he didn't understand: soil reports, rock density testing, sheaves of paper full of geological terms he didn't understand, but he could follow a map, he could see when two things matched. Around midnight he finally went back to the Dolores, head full.

Food came in a deluge. When he asked the woman at the front desk—Evelyn, it turned out—where he could rent a dumpster, she handed him the yellow pages and a loaf

of banana bread as she tried to get answers out of him about what exactly was going in the dumpster.

"I've heard she had lots of stuff," she said, ungracefully.

"It's mostly junk," said Brian. "Thanks for the bread."

"It's got chocolate chips!" she said as the door swung shut behind him.

A woman with long graying hair showed up on his doorstep the same way Julie had, holding a glass dish covered in foil and a sheaf of dried leaves all tied together. He invited her in and she exclaimed over everything, too busy looking around at all Annie's things to make real conversation, hadn't known Annie all that well to begin with. She pulled out a lighter and lit the leaves without asking, walking down the hallway, through the living room while waving it around.

"Smudging to clear the house of bad spirits," she said. Brian had been watching, too interested to ask her to stop. "Native Americans do it to purify the air and the soul. It works best if I do it in all the rooms. Can I go in here?" she opened Annie's bedroom without waiting for Brian to answer, waved the smoke around.

"I didn't know her all that well, but everyone is devastated at her loss," she said a few minutes later, sitting at the formica table and fiddling with a long, dangling earring. "It's terrible."

Dave knocked on his door wearing a short-sleeve button-up shirt and long pants with a meatloaf. A very short woman, either Asian or Latino, Brian honestly couldn't tell, told him her name was Isabel and handed over a tray full of dumplings, a note about how to steam-fry taped to the top. He got lasagnas, brownies, a macrobiotic kale salad, a six pack of Miller High Life, all from people who showed up on his doorstep so he invited

them in and they could take a gander. His fridge was full to bursting. After the sun went down he took to covering food with the newspapers from the living room and throwing them in the dumpster, under cover of darkness, and there was still enough in the fridge for one man to eat for weeks. He felt like he was in a fishbowl, the whole town looking in, discussing him among themselves, speculating about what Annie's house held. Who this stranger was that was now responsible for it. Days went by and Joe didn't visit, not that I want him to, thought Brian, even though I've got some questions.

Julie texted him: *This is Julie. I heard Sylvia visited you.*

She's something else, he texted back.

Your house cleared of its bad juju? Brian smiled.

Every morning he got to Annie's house around ten. He liked to start with that list he'd made the first day, and then write out a new list. Knowing his goals for the day was comforting, meant he didn't really have to think on his feet. The living room was starting to clear out, reams and reams of weird old newspapers in Chinese and Spanish gone into the dumpster that lived next to the house now. He still had the table, the bookshelves of dead animals, the recliner, the old TV. He'd washed the glass that she'd been drinking from and now it was in the kitchen cabinet, just another glass. The tinfoil was out of the windows and the cacti looked happier; the AC was on all day, now, the room bearable even in the afternoon heat.

Everything to do with the mine, he put on the table in the morning. In the afternoon, he went through it, afternoons that began to turn into evenings, late nights,

reading old books that turned out to be one account of the mine or another: a doctor who claimed that the Indians had led him to the mine, blindfolded, given him gold and led him back to town still blindfolded. Half a dozen people who'd come upon bones in the desert and said it was El Cañon; half a dozen more who claimed that the Celestial had befriended them and them only and told them where the mine was. Over this mountain, past three arroyos, and then when you see the place where the sheep graze, turn toward the sun. Those were terrible directions, Brian thought, and then he tried to follow them anyway, one hand on the book and another on the map.

As a teenager, he'd spent years trying to prove that he was nothing like her, years trying to forget that they had half the same mannerisms, the same nervous tic of rubbing their forefingers and thumbs together, the same surprised laugh. He stayed in Ukiah, he married a woman who wanted more than anything to marry him, he even worked for his father.

But, at the table, looking at maps and stories and charts, he began to trace her thought patterns, could almost settle into their grooves in the papers. They had the same way of approaching a puzzle: what if they premise was wrong? What if you turned the map upside down? What if hills had worn down, boulders rolled, arroyos cleaved open since 1910? How did she get from this to this, he thought, looking at her neat lines, her careful drawing, comparing it to the nonsense he found in books or the abstract qualities of the rough maps, and he found that he could follow her leaps in logic, her hunches. She began to make sense. Brian went home later and later at night, tired, head full of trails and ridges, places no one had tried.

Julie texted one afternoon, three or four days after she brought tamales: *I still owe you that drink*. Brian read it and didn't respond, put his phone away and cleared a box of knickknacks marked GOODWILL. On top was a mug with a smiling sheep that said *Ewe's not fat, ewe's just fluffy!* What would a drink hurt, anyway? People made friends of the opposite sex all the time, and it wasn't weird. He was married, he had his ring on all the time, she knew that. You're too suspicious, he told himself, but he didn't text her back. The living room was almost done except the table.

He called Michelle. She asked when he'd be back and he said he wasn't sure, he was making progress but the house was pretty bad. Another week maybe. He hadn't even decided what to do with the—with *her*, though he had another day or two, the Sheriff said, and then there was putting the house on the market and everything. Come back for a while, she said, do you have to do that right away? Instead of just saying yes he said he'd think about it.

* * *

It was late but the lights were all on at Annie's house. Joe circled the neighborhood again. Now the kitchen light out, then the living room light out, one more pass, the bedroom light out. Small pale Brian walking to her Jeep, so Joe cut his own headlights, pulled over, waited for the kid to leave. He wondered if he was always at the house this late, eager to pack up all her things and get going. Everyone in town had been by to give the kid their regrets and to see the inside of the house; there had even been some stupid rumor that the mine was under her bed. He knew he should go sometime, that six tequila shots and a beer didn't count as a proper "Sorry for your loss" dinner, but

Joe was getting there slowly, taking the scenic route. Kid was taking long enough in her car, wait, there were headlights, there he went.

Joe still waited, long enough for the neighbors to stop paying attention, long enough to make sure Brian hadn't forgotten anything to come back for. He wound down the window in his truck and let the cool air in, dangled one elbow out, finally started his truck again and parked in her driveway. Let himself in through the kitchen door.

The kid hadn't closed the curtains in here and the sodium vapor light next door came through the window full force, slanted against the wall opposite, make her little formica table look sinister, the countertop ugly, the whole room like it was from some bad detective movie where it did nothing but rain all day. Pierre was on the windowsill to the right of the door, and Joe grabbed him as he moved through the kitchen. He knew better than to stay but wanted to see her house one more time, the way it had been, more or less at least. Her maps all over that table in the living room, her papers in boxes all around, the tinfoil off the front window. The cacti were looking better, Joe had to admit.

He left through the front door and went back to his truck where Pierre sat shotgun on the way back to his own house, miles outside town, a low building with two metal sheds and a garage, invisible from 62, flanked by three hills hulking like bodyguards. Without going in he went to a shed, took a shovel, and dug where he thought Pierre's other bones were buried, the day he and Annie had found the poor little guy, a young bighorn sheep who'd fallen from the rocks above. Annie had named him for someone she'd gone to college with who'd jumped out of a fifth-story window, so high he thought he could fly. She'd taken the skull for display and he'd taken a hoof, and she used to talk to him when she would fuss around the kitchen—"Pierre, where'd I put the garlic?" or

"Pierre, did I leave the stove on?" Just nonsense talk, the way people talked to their pets when they felt like talking to something. The skull sat in the window and looked out at the desert where it had died, something both goofy and sinister all wrapped up in the sharp white bone. Don't you feel like it's watching you, Joe had asked once, sitting at her table looking at some sort of map he didn't really understand, and she'd said, nah, it's just a dead thing, just a skull. In life it was just a sheep. He guessed she was right, but there was still something unnerving about it, having the deceased in your kitchen like that.

He'd buried the hoof in his backyard which was really just the desert, no telling where his property ended and the Mojave began, apologizing the entire time to poor Pierre, the sheep who fell.

Joe still prayed in Spanish, *Padre nuestro que estás en los cielos* first, for Pierre, and then again for her and then despite years of childhood training under stained glass in those Mission-style pews, it fell to nonsensical half-thoughts, *I'm sorry* and *why didn't I* and *please.* Even after that he stayed kneeling on the ground for a long time, his feet falling asleep, his knees stiff and cold. The entire rigging of his bones creaked when he rose and he felt his age in it. I should just ask the kid, he thought, he worst he could say is no.

Chapter Six

He hadn't texted back. Julie felt out of her element, too old to be waiting for some boy to text her back, even if that boy had what she wanted. Hadn't she been interesting, once, a woman who men wanted to impress? That was the way to do it, Jefferson had told her over and over again: make them chase you, whether it's for dates or to give you their money, make it their idea. People are suspicious of what you offer them, but they're not suspicious of their own desires. Everyone considers themselves above suspicion.

The suitcase was in her bedroom closet, behind a slatted white door that always stuck a little. She had to jerk it open, and then sat there for a long time, looking at it, half hidden behind the clothes she'd kept, clothes she hadn't gotten to wear yet here. Half of them still in dry cleaners' bags, shoes all in boxes down below. Her childhood had taught her to treasure the nice things that she had, and even years of acting rich in public hadn't taught her to do it in private. Jefferson had teased her about things like that, about putting away clothes neatly and hanging up jewelry even she was dead tired and drunk, but she saw him do the same. Poor kid stuff. It was just as well, because here she was now, eating

beans and rice with no neighbors, buying furniture at the Goodwill, sleeping on a bedframe and mattress she'd gotten from Costco. Before Twentynine Palms, she'd never have thought Costco sold mattresses. Now she bought toilet paper and rice in bulk, jammed her freezer full of boxes of meat.

She hauled out the suitcase, swung it onto the bed, opened it. Checking its contents always soothed her, reminded her that she had options, even if they were limited. Inside: three days of clothing, underwear, bras, a pair of walking shoes, clothes that were high-quality and durable, the sort of things upper middle class Americans bought for their European vacations. A toothbrush, a hairbrush, a tube of mascara. An unactivated cellphone, a charger. $5,000 in cash. A ring box of the bones she'd terrified her sisters with. A dead woman's passport: Ana Davidson, twenty-nine, New Mexico resident, light skin and black hair, someone who looked like her mother had seen omens. Julie went through it carefully, examined everything, placed it back where it had been. She'd only needed to use it once, years ago, the exact same suitcase, though then she'd been Heather Martinez. Jefferson's voice on the phone in Mammoth, that drawl: well, I was at a cocktail party last night and met the real Marriott heir and he didn't know of any Hank Rochambeau, so we gotta get out. Couldn't have foreseen it. Sweetheart, we practiced, he said when she panicked. There's a Hyundai parked in a garage off 16th, drive it to Oregon, grow out your leg hair, blast the Indigo Girls at full volume in your car, sprout grains. I'll call. He had, and three months later had shown up as a middle-aged hippie who'd just come out to his wife and then left her. They stayed in Oregon for a year before leaving with fifty thousand dollars of an idealistic kid's trust fund.

She could take it and leave. That was why she had it, for when Twentynine Palms stopped working out, but she hated leaving without at least making some money. From an outside perspective, it was stupid to discard Julie Gutierrez if she didn't have to. Identities didn't grow on trees. From inside, she didn't think she was going to get anywhere. No one in Twentynine Palms had any money, because if you did, you didn't live there. Except Annie, apparently, but the only thing that made Brian worth it was the impending liquidity. She wondered what he liked, what he wanted bad enough break the law for, zipping the suitcase shut, stowing it back in the closet. Sometimes there was nothing, but she hated to give up so easily.

* * *

She threw caution to the wind and turned up on his doorstep again, this time at night, holding a bottle of wine. What did it matter if she was too forward with him? He'd leave town thinking some older Mexican woman had a crush on him. Not the end of the world.

"I said I owed you a drink," she said when he answered.

"You didn't have to," he said. She stood on the porch for another moment, looking up at him. He got the hint. "Come in," he said.

They walked to the kitchen and he found a corkscrew, poured them wine in old jam jars as she sat at the table.

"How's it going?" she asked when he handed her one.

"I'm making progress," he said, and gave her a rundown: this thrown out, this box to Goodwill, the rest not decided yet. "That TV might be older than me," he joked.

Julie got up, walked into the living room, looked at the TV in question. “It might be,” she said. The room was emptier: her timer. When it was empty, he left and her chance at his inheritance was gone. “They haven’t made TVs with knobs like that for thirty, forty years. You could probably get at least fifty from somebody who’s interested in the novelty value.”

“You know antiques?”

“I used to work in an antiques store.” Sort of true, she thought. She and Jefferson had been antiques dealers once, running a scam with a guy who peddled fakes. Doug, the craftsman, had been a true artist. She and Jefferson had quickly learned that it was more profitable to sell furniture they claimed to have illegally. The best had been a desk they said had belonged to George Washington.

“Where?”

“Reno.”

“I went there once. Or, I went through it. Visiting family in Salt Lake City.”

Julie laughed. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“You’re from there?”

“I’m from Riverside,” she said. It wasn’t true but Riverside was the perfect answer to that question, she’d found. No one ever wanted to hear more about Riverside; no one had gone on vacation there and thought it was just so quaint or found this little cafe that they just loved. Riverside was strip malls and identical housing developments, trailer parks and meth labs, box stores and neighbors who never knew each other’s last names. Small enough to be specific, big enough that you could live there for years and not know anyone in common with someone else.

"What were you doing in Reno?"

"Working at an antiques store."

"You moved there for that?"

Good point, Julie thought. She hadn't, of course, she had run to Reno after getting married too young to someone who only loved her for six months, after taking out a credit card in his name and buying herself a used car and a diamond necklace with it, after writing bad checks in his name. She sat on the arm of the upholstered chair, took a sip from the jar, looked up at Brian through her bangs.

"I was a showgirl," she said. "In one of the casinos downtown."

He perched on the table, shifting some of the maps around. "A showgirl?"

"It's true," she said, and laughed. "I don't tell many people about that."

"You didn't go to Vegas?"

"I wasn't good enough for Vegas," she said. That at least wasn't a lie. "I wasn't really good enough for Reno, but I'd dreamed of being a dancer, and I had a cousin who lived there, so I moved up after high school and gave it a shot. They fired me for mouthing off when a customer tried to feel me up, and I got the job at the antique store."

"I should do something like that," he said.

"Chippendales? Maybe." Julie said. For the hell of it, she winked.

Brian blushed and looked away, at the corner of the room where the AC was. "No, no. I mean I should move somewhere away from Ukiah for a while."

"Move down to San Francisco," she said. "You, and—"

"Michelle."

"Move back to Ukiah when you're thirty."

"She'd hate the city. She even hated Sacramento when we were in college."

"Well, that was Sacramento." Any city called 'the sack' by even the people who lived there was a shitty place to live, Julie thought.

"She wants to have a baby."

"Oh," Julie said.

"Yeah," Brian said, and they went quiet for a moment. Julie looked at the table full of maps and charts, old books, pencils and highlighters scattered. This must be Annie's mine stuff, she thought. Brian was looking down at his left hand, and she thought: there's no baby *yet*. She checked her watch.

"You know why I came over tonight?"

"Because hanging out in a hoarder's house after dark is a good time?"

"There's a meteor shower."

"Outside?"

She laughed, and he joined in.

"Right," he said, still smiling.

"There's good stars here," she said.

"All right," he said.

They took a blanket from Annie's bedroom, one that didn't look too nice, and laid it out in her backyard. They turned off all the lights in the house and laid there, waiting, under the stars. The sodium-vapor light next door burned and blocked out half the sky, but they watched over the desert for the white streaks back and forth.

"I used to do this with my sisters," Julie said, and then caught herself. No stars in Riverside. "When we'd go camping out in the desert, anyway."

“You can see everything.”

“You could see more if this light weren’t here.” Julie felt rather than saw his face turn toward her, looking at the light, then looking at her. Then looking back up at the sky.

“There goes one,” he pointed.

“I missed it.”

“Well, it’s gone now,” he said. He moved his head over toward hers, so they were an inch apart, so their hair was touching. So their shoulders were almost touching. “It was there,” he said, and he pointed at a blank spot in the sky. They froze that way, close enough to touch but not, and Julie watched the sky and thought, pointed out streaks of light as they shot across the sky, bumped her hand into his, sometimes without meaning to.

“Are you looking for the mine?” she asked.

He shifted, tugged the blanket under them lightly, turned his head a little, looked back up. “It’s hard not to,” he finally said. “Not really, I’m not. But it’s all right there. It’s easy to open a book and look at a map, and think, what if it’s right there, you know?”

“I don’t think it’s there.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. I don’t think it exists.”

“Why?”

“No one’s found it. No one is seriously looking for it.”

“I thought—“

“People are. But where are the mining companies, the people who actually know how to do this stuff? They don’t think there’s anything.”

Brian was quiet for a long time, pointing once at a meteor that shot all the way across the sky, a slow burn from pole to pole, until the desert cold finally settled into them, until the backside of Julie's body was numb and they walked back inside.

"You throw out that skull?" Julie asked, flipping on the light switch.

"What skull?"

"The skull in the window."

Brian frowned. "No," he said. He looked around the kitchen as if expecting to find it somewhere, the blanket tangled around one arm. "I guess I moved it, though."

Julie shrugged. "I should go," she said. Make them chase you, she thought.

"Thanks for the wine," Brian said. He ran one hand through his hair, messed up from lying on the ground. "It's good to see someone. I get weird in this house, alone all day."

"This would be hard for anyone," Julie said, and she put her hand on his shoulder, again. "Be nice to yourself, okay?"

"Okay," he said, and she kissed his cheek and then she left through the kitchen door, walked across the yard, drove away before she could regret doing it.

* * *

Goffs, where Julie watched meteor showers with her sisters, had fifty-one residents when she was born and she made fifty-two. Her name was Guadalupe then, because her mother had seen La Virgen the night her first daughter was conceived, she said, and she promised to name it after her in return for a healthy pregnancy, and the girl was born dark pink and screaming. Guadalupe of the Desert. Twenty-five years later she would look up her own name, the apparition she was named after whose miracle was

roses in December, a vision on a cold hill outside Mexico City. Five hundred years before. Guadalupe, one source said, was what the Spanish heard when Juan Diego came rushing down the hill overflowing with blossoms shouting *it is She Who Crushes the Serpent*.

She lived with her parents, her two sisters and her mother's brothers in a building that had been a motel, once, when people had visited the town on Route 66 years ago. The uncles didn't officially count toward the population of Goffs. Her mother only counted because she'd married her father, and so Julie learned from an early age that a person could be both there and not there, extant and not. That there was a shadow space around civilization where people could fall to or place themselves.

Goffs had been dying since it was born. The train station still stood even though the train hadn't gone through in fifty years. The gas station and general store still stood, the station dry, the general store dusty-shelved, even though it was thirty years since the government rerouted Highway 66 to pass miles to the south. Adobe crumbled in the sun, corrugated roofs rusted, wood frames splintered in the heat.

Her mother saw an omen before every life event. Her sister Maria was born after her mother had a dream of an earthquake rending the earth apart and spitting forth black volcanic glass, Rosa after a raven brought her a lock of hair in a dream. All three girls looked like volcanic glass in the desert, like ravens perched on sandstone, sand-colored skin, shiny black hair.

By the time Guadalupe was six she was leading her sisters into the desert on exploration expeditions. They found shacks and cars, long abandoned and left to the sun,

all metal rusted and all wood bleached light gray like stone. They learned about death and anatomy by finding skeletons; mice and jackrabbits in the old shacks, sometimes deer in mesquite thickets, once an entire bighorn sheep on top of a rocky hill where they weren't supposed to be. The sun bleached the skeletons a perfect white, whiter than the wings on the angels in the pictures her mother kept, whiter than the tilma Guadalupe's namesake wore in her portrait that hung in the living room.

Their mother saw a hawk fly into the air with a baby tortoise and drop it onto a rock to eat its soft inside; Maria fell off a boulder and broke her leg trying to follow her big sister up it. They rushed her into Needles, leaving Guadalupe and Rosa in the care of the uncles, who taught them how to call someone's mother a whore in Spanish to distract them from their sister's pain.

When Maria finally got her cast off the girls celebrated by exploring a mine shaft with flashlights stolen from the general store, and that was there they found the bones, sharp white in the beams of light, scattered across the narrow passage. They were certain that they were human and didn't know why. Each took a small bone and kept it close for the rest of her life, never telling anyone besides her two sisters.

For months afterwards, Guadalupe terrified the others with stories of Pablo, the boy who fell, saying that his ghost visited her at night asking for his toes back. They never told an adult.

Their mother, alone in the general store one day, helped a well-dressed white man who asked how many daughters she had, a man no one else saw or heard; a week later, the county called and told them the girls had to start attending Needles High. The school

bus was an off-white van from san Bernardino county, an old jail van. Still bolted into its sides were places to attach handcuffs.

While their mother was hanging laundry, the wind came up and snatched one of Guadalupe's shirts from her hands, blew it across the desert. She never got it back. The next day, at Needles High School, Guadalupe met Justin Jackson, a white boy a year older than her. He was shy and intense, got good grades, and was smart enough to want to leave Needles, so he signed up with the naval recruiter who seemed to always be roaming the halls. Justin proposed the night he signed his military papers, gave her a silver ring that had hearts carved into the side and promised her a diamond engagement ring someday; he graduated and Guadalupe finished her junior year.

Guadalupe told her parents she was marrying Justin and they told her differently. She was forbidden from leaving Goffs, even for school, the keys to the car next to her father at all times and the phone watched like a hawk though the town and the desert made its own prison with nothing but forty miles of yucca plants and mine shafts between it and the nearest civilization.

After a week she managed a phone call; two nights after that she packed everything she could in a backpack and, at two in the morning, walked five miles down Goffs Road so her parents wouldn't see Justin's headlights. The moon was so bright as she walked that she could see her shadow, could see the mountains in the distance silhouetted against the sky. Finally Justin drove up with just his parking lights on, using the moonlight to steer by. He stopped his car in the middle of the road and they kissed when she got in, then held hands as he drove.

Guadalupe was seventeen, still too young to marry without her parents' consent in the state of California, but her week of imprisonment had been productive. She'd managed to find the key to her parents' fireproof lockbox, and from it, she'd pilfered her birth certificate. She changed the 79 to a 78, and when they arrived in Ridgecrest, they married at town hall. It had been so, so easy, that first step. A week later Guadalupe Schmidt had a military spouse ID that said Guadalupe Jackson and had a birthdate one year earlier and she learned to be herself and someone else.

Julie walked into her house, shut and locked the heavy wooden door, flipped on the lights, tossed her keys onto the table. It wasn't too late but she brushed her teeth and then lay in her bed, the ceiling and the walls and the sky outside all nearly pitch black, and she thought about her night. About Brian's body that close to hers, about the moment in his kitchen, saying goodbye, where for a flash kissing him on the lips had seemed appropriate, like the right goodbye for that moment. She thought about what he said about the mine, that it was hard not to look. People around her had always had faith, always been more trusting, always been able to believe, but she thought she might be missing that part of her brain, the synapse or lobe that made someone sure there was a higher power or that legends were true. As she drifted away to sleep, Julie thought about snakes.

Chapter Seven

And then, Brian thought maybe he'd found something. A spot, in the crook of some mountains east of town, inside the park, where some of Annie's maps had a big dot. Turned to the right angle, so did some of the old maps. The old accounts, the doctor, the midwife, the white girl who said she'd been taken in by the Indians—no specific tribe, just *the Indians*—as an infant, they might describe that spot. It was hard to tell, but what if there was something. Julie was probably right about the mine, that if there were any evidence, someone with more money would be looking for it, but he thought: why not go look. He felt softer toward Annie since he'd been looking over her work and staying in her house all day, since he'd met Joe who wasn't completely honest with him, but who was clearly a wreck over her death. At least someone was.

Out of habit, Brian checked the weather for the next couple of days. The weather channel showed the same thing again and again: ninety-five and sunny, ninety-five and sunny, ninety-five and sunny. Sometimes he forget where he was. He called Julie and asked if she wanted to go for a hike, and he said he'd pick her up.

Before he left, he called Michelle.

"Miss you," he said.

"When are you coming back?"

"Soon."

"Next week?"

"Maybe. There's still a lot to do here."

Silence. Something in the air between Twentynine Palms and Ukiah crackled.

"Please come back next week," she said. Brian heard the trouble there.

"I'll try," he said. He didn't tell her that instead of cleaning the house out today, he was going for a hike. He especially didn't tell her that he was going with a woman he'd befriended, who brought over bottles of wine and watched meteor showers with him. Julie was just being nice, he knew, but there was no reason to worry Michelle.

Annie's Jeep hummed down the imaginary road from Julie's, down the asphalt faded in the sun, onto 62 and then down the long road into the national park, climbing and leaving Twentynine Palms behind. From here it was easy to feel like the town had been some sort of desert mirage, that he had dreamed the whole thing as he crossed the Mojave, that he was driving back home.

"What are those things?" Brian finally asked, pointing to the funny-shaped trees that dotted the desert.

"Joshua trees," said Julie.

"Oh," he said. There was a moment. "Like the park?"

"Like the park," Julie said, laughing at him.

"That's barely a tree," he said. "Don't laugh at me."

They passed the guard station, turned east, past picnic stations and trailheads, tourists posing for photos. Every couple of miles he had to pull over and consult all the maps, compare the ones he'd brought to Annie's big trail map of Joshua Tree, to the pamphlet they'd gotten at the gate. He tried to explain his system to Julie but it quickly became apparent that it didn't make sense to anyone besides him: that this map had roads, this map had trails and mountains, a third had park boundaries. The park was sun-washed, boulders piled high into mountains. Everything looked like an overexposed photograph. Being outside in it made Brian feel like he might fade into the background, might only show up someday as a pair of eyes staring back from a 4x6 postcard in an antique store someday.

He pulled off onto a dirt track and stopped to consult the maps again.

"I think this is it," he said.

"So what if it isn't?" Julie said. "We'll still go for a hike."

She had a point. There was one sign at the mouth of the road: high clearance vehicles only, next twenty-two miles. The gas tank was full and the AC was on, and Brian drove it slowly at first but sped up to forty, forty-five down the rutted road, the two of them bouncing along in the car. The wall of dust trailed them and blew up like a veil in the wind. The car windows were hot to the touch and they showed the same scenery, over and over, little changes in the details, this boulder here and that bush there but one rock looks like another, one arroyo, one canyon mouth, one peak. This is how you get lost out here, Brian realized. You can see everything but it's all the same. The road rocked them

into a cozy silence, like two eggs in an egg crate, he thought. Hey, the desert makes me a poet.

He pulled off the track at a crook in the mountains, studied the maps for a while.

"I think this is it," he announced. "There should be a trail right over there, though this one guide says it's a 'cross country' trail, and I'm not sure what that means. It might mean there's not really a trail."

"So you're just going to lead me off into the wilderness with your crazy map system?"

"I've got a compass."

Julie laughed. That was the thing, Brian thought. They got out of the car and set out, a trail that was barely a trail, a hitch in the hill that wound up it slowly. They used their hands which turned chalky from the pale, crumbly dirt. Brian wondered what rain would look like here, what it could do to the landscape. He remembered the story Joe had told, about how the world had been a lake. Ridiculous. It seemed like water would dissolve the mountains at a touch, wash away these goofy shallow-rooted trees.

"Does it ever rain?" he asked, turning his head so she could hear him.

"We get cloudbursts during the winter," she said.

"Sounds serious."

"Oh, it just means thunderstorms. It'll rain like hell for twenty minutes and then it's over."

"That not so bad."

“It causes a lot of flash floods. You’d be surprised.” She stopped and turned away from the hill they were climbing, touched his arm. “See all those gouges in the hills?” She pointed at the far hills, deep troughs carved into them; she pointed to the gulches and arroyos that spilled sand down out of the hills.

“Yeah.”

“That’s what the rain does. Twenty minutes.”

Brian put down the pack he was carrying, took out a bottle of water and stood, drinking it. His skin already felt gritty, like he was shedding fine silt.

“Why live here?”

“Me, or anyone?”

“Both.”

She took a long drink, looked out over the desert. “Well,” she said. “I told everyone I had a bad divorce and came here to get away from everything.”

“But?”

“But, it’s not true.” She hesitated for a moment and then said, “I used to be engaged.”

“That’s not too different.”

“If I tell you what happened, will you promise to believe me?”

“He run off with another showgirl?”

“He fell into the fault.”

Brian didn’t have a response. Those words didn’t make sense together, he thought. “That’s,” he tried, recalibrated, started over again. “A fault, the thing earthquakes come from?”

Julie nodded.

"You can fall into a fault?"

"You can if they're big enough."

"That's awful," Brian said. "I'm sorry."

"He was standing on it and there was an earthquake," Julie said.

"Why would you do that?"

"He was a geologist," Julie said. "Studying seismology."

"Wow," was all Brian could think of.

"I haven't told anyone else," she said. "I don't think they'd believe me."

"I don't blame you," he said.

She put her water back into her pack, slung it onto her back, rearranged her black hair under her hat. "How much further?"

Fifteen minutes later they were on top of the rocky rise and sat, drinking again. Julie hadn't said much since the revelation about her fiancé, as if some weight hung between them that hadn't been there in the car, as if she had created a hole with her admission for him to fill, cover over with a statement of his own, as if she were waiting for him to do it.

"I don't want kids," was what he said, and then he stood there, surprised. Is that even true, he wondered. "Not yet, anyway."

Julie's eyebrows were up, and she looked over his face for a few seconds. Brian could almost feel her eyes poking at the cracks in his face. "Does Michelle know?" she asked.

Brian exhaled and sat on a low rock, both elbows leaning on his knees. “I don’t know,” he said. “It doesn’t matter. She never even asked whether I was ready, just said, okay, I’m going off the pill this month.”

“That was it?”

“I know, right?”

Julie paused. “It seems like you ought to have a conversation about that beforehand,” she said. “Have you said anything?”

Brian cracked his knuckles. He’d thought about bringing it up with Michelle sometimes, but letting her have the baby almost seemed like the easier course. He knew she’d take charge, let him know what he should do and when. That was what he loved about her. “Not really. She makes me feel like such a monster sometimes.”

“How?”

“She cries at the littlest thing,” he said. “She really wanted to hang our wedding pictures over the mantle, and I didn’t, but she got her way because she ended up sobbing about how important that day was to her and how she wants to grow old looking at it every morning and night. She doesn’t mean to. I just feel like a bull in a china shop around her.” Brian had never put it into words before, and as he listened to himself talk, he thought: this sounds insane. If someone told me this, I’d be horrified for them. I’d never tell them to have a child. “It’s not that bad, though,” he said in an attempt to normalize it, stop the bleeding. “It’s fine. We’re close to the spot.”

They hiked down the other side of the ridge, through a small boulder field, Brian thinking that he’d committed the opposite sin, that he’d told too much. Michelle didn’t

deserve this, some woman she didn't know thinking she was crazy, but there was a nagging doubt, the feeling that he'd told the truth about her for the first time in years. He couldn't say he'd been lying, but he felt ugly about it. He wished he could take it back.

Then they walked between two massive rocks into a sandy clearing and there it was: two adobe walls built into the rock, under an overhang.

"It's a house," he said, surprised. He hadn't known what to expect, but it wasn't this: a pile of rocks, maybe, some horrible skeleton, a post in the ground, someone's creepy grave. Knowing Annie's house, he'd half-thought it would be a pile of useless newspapers or interesting-looking bricks. Instead, this, a building someone had taken the time and effort to make here, in the middle of nowhere. He dropped his pack in the dirt and went through its doorway, submerged in the dark as soon as he went inside. The temperature dropped twenty degrees. He walked forward, hands out, the only light needles that came through the chinks in the wall. It went further back than he would have thought, just enough room for one person to have a cot and a table, a little space to walk around in.

"Watch out for scorpions," she said. "They like to hide in cool places during the day."

Had Annie found this place? Had she stood here and thought, I'm close? Thought that this was proof of some kind, that this find was a good reason to keep looking? Had she needed more reasons?

"I thought it was going to be just a story," he said. Julie came in and stood in the doorway, backlit, outlined against the sun.

“There are a thousand shacks out here,” she said. “Prospectors built them all the time. I bet there’s ten built into the side of a rock like this.”

They aren’t all where the stories say to find them, he thought, they’re not on the spots that Annie circled on her map. This was how she felt, then, when she looked for something and found it. She felt cupped in the palm of the earth, victorious, like she wanted to follow the clues to the next one and the next one. It wasn’t about the mine, it was about being the one who finally found it.

“What if it’s his?” he said.

Julie moved from the doorway inside, toward him, the specks of light flicking across her face and she came toward him. She stopped close, hard to tell how close in the dark like that, but he could smell her shampoo mixed with the tang of her sweat.

“It could be anybody’s,” she said, her hand rising to brush the adobe walls with her fingertips and Brian had the sudden urge to grab her hand and lick the dust from her fingers, one by one, the chalky grit and her sweat combining on his tongue, her hand cool in his mouth, soft under his teeth. He swallowed and wondered if she could see him and then put one hand on her shoulder, navigated around her back to the sunlight, taking a deep breath back out in the open air, shaking the taste of dust from his mouth. He took another drink of water, closed his eyes against the sunlight, but all he thought of was Julie’s hand brushing his when they met, her face close to his on the blanket under the meteors.

“There’s a lamp in here,” her disembodied voice said from the black hole of the doorway.

“What kind of lamp?” he called, not going back into the dark with her.

She came and stood in the doorway, holding a lump of metal in her hand. “Maybe not,” she said.

Brian stood, he walked back toward her, he took the thing from her hands without touching her. “It could have been a lamp,” he said.

“The glass is gone,” she said.

“It’s not like kids come here to drink and fuck,” he said. “There’s gotta be easier places to get to.”

Julie laughed. “For sure,” she said, taking back the lamp, turning it over and over in her hands. “Wait for it to get dark and you can go anywhere.”

“We used to do it in the woods,” Brian said. “Couldn’t see twenty feet after dark. Went home with your clothes covered in leaves and dirt. Once I fell into a creek that I couldn’t see and had to wait to dry off before I could go back home.”

“What did you say?”

“I don’t even remember. I think I told my dad I’d fallen into a flowerbed.”

“He buy it?”

“I guess I’d remember if he didn’t.”

Julie ran her thumb over the lamp one more time, turned it in her hand. “I’m gonna put it back, let someone else find it,” she said, and walked back into the shack. Brian followed her in and stood by the wall, looked at the chips of light on the rock opposite.

“I think this is the shack,” he said. He felt seventeen again, alone with Julie in the dark where he wasn’t supposed to be, and he reached out and caught her hand. She made a small noise, a confused noise, he thought, and he raised it to his lips, kissed her palm,

heard the smallest intake of breath and then moved to her wrist, warm, her pulse under his mouth, he didn't know what he was doing, her arm, her elbow until he hit her sleeve and stopped, that juncture of flesh and fabric making him suddenly aware of how stupid this was, how no one did this outside of Dracula movies. He dropped her hand.

"Oh god," he said. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he repeated, dropping to a whisper, the adobe wall immovable at his back, and he found her hand back in his, dry and dusty and warm.

"Tell me about sneaking into the woods," she said.

All he could see was an outline of her head, his hand, both of hers snaking around it, sandwiching it. The air moved when she stepped closer. "It was a national forest," he said. "There was a picnic area, and it was closed at night, but we could park so the cops couldn't see our cars from the road."

"What then," she said. He felt the puffs of her breath on his knuckles and he closed his eyes. It looked just like before.

"We'd take the sheets off our beds and bring them. If we remembered. Otherwise we'd just lie down in the dirt. We didn't care. The best spot was close to a creek where we could hear the water rushing past." Something soft on his knuckles. "Even there, we were always quiet, like someone could hear us. We always whispered." Brian put out his other hand, found her hair, followed it down to her neck. Her face tilted up.

"What did you say?"

"I don't remember."

Their foreheads together. His heart pounding, his body shaking with the force of every beat. Leave, he thought, this is still okay if you just leave right now.

“I don’t do this,” he whispered, and in a motion he shook her off and walked back toward the sunlit doorway.

They hiked down in silence. Brian thought he should say something. Offer an apology, an explanation, but what could he say? I felt like no one could see me, so it was okay? I wanted to lick the dirt off your hands? Please don’t tell my wife? Julie looked out the window as he drove down the dirt road, even faster than before, to the park roads, 62, her ghost neighborhood.

“Thanks,” she said when she got out at her house.

“I had a nice time,” he said. What a dumb fucking thing to say, he thought, but she gave him a long look when he did. He drove back to the Dolores, took a shower, and watched TV all night so he wouldn’t have to think.