

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
Edmond, Oklahoma
Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

On Stony Ground

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

By
Chase Dearing
Edmond, OK
2011

On Stony Ground

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

April 12, 2011

By *Rick Akers*

Mark ... Ph.D.

Christopher ... Ph.D. chair

ABTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Chase Dearing

TITLE: On Stony Ground

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Constance Squires

PAGES: 313

On Stony Ground chronicles the adventures of Goose, a young runaway, and his friend Henry, a mentally handicapped man who helps Goose survive in the small town of Cimarron, Oklahoma. Goose's journey begins when he is expelled from the storage unit that he is living in with his meth-addicted mother after a run-in with his mother's new boyfriend. It is at this point that Goose meets Henry and the two develop a friendship that shapes the novel and provides the majority of its conflict. Goose's father, who has recently been released from prison and is cooking meth in a local motel, soon abducts his son. Before Henry can rescue Goose, Goose must face not only his abusive father but also the Deer Woman, a Native American curse. Goose soon learns that Henry's grandmother has died, and the two attempt to bury the body in an effort to prevent the inevitable institutionalization of Henry. The two are caught, however, and separated by the courts. Goose is sent to live with his maternal grandfather while Henry is sent to live in a home for the mentally disabled. Goose's grandfather subjects the boy to his fanatical Pentecostalism, and Goose eventually accepts the beliefs as his own and begins to believe that he has been chosen by God to save his family. These plans are interrupted, however, when his mother's return leads to infighting and familial strife. Goose runs, and in an attempt to rescue Henry from the home in which he has been placed, ends up getting both of them mixed up with the Goodwin brothers, two escaped convicts. The Goodwins hold the two hostage, along with Goose's father, who owes money to the escaped convicts. *On Stony Ground* climaxes with the subsequent shootout and fire that the hostage situation creates. Goose survives, but Henry does not. Goose is forced to examine his role in his best friend's death, an examination that reiterates the theme of sin that is central to the novel.

On Stony Ground

Introduction to *On Stony Ground*

The first thing I ever wrote was a fourteen page “novel” titled *The Adventures of Luke Skywalker*. I was nine. The epic story chronicled the adventures of Luke Skywalker as he traveled through space and time to battle the Morlocks on my Dying Earth rendition of the planet Tatooine, which was covered in swamps (I had, at the time, made the paramount error of confusing Tatooine with Dagobah). The story was essentially a mishmash of two of my favorite stories: *Star Wars* and *The Time Machine*. I continued in this vein for a couple of years, adding short stories that explained the origins of the Morlocks and justified their existence in a galaxy far, far away, until the age of eleven, when I really turned up the heat. The result was a fifty-six-page tome titled *Alienbusters*. I won’t go into the gritty details of this collection of interconnected stories based “loosely” on the characters of *Ghostbusters* (I changed it to aliens!), but you can see where I’m going with this, I hope. Pastiche has always been my favorite form of literature, and *On Stony Ground* is no exception.

My first complete, “real” novel is an amalgamation of some of my favorite stories of all time. In it, you will find *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Star Wars*, *The Violent Bear it Away*, the Bible, *Crime and Punishment*, and reimagined characters like Lenny of *Of Mice and Men* and The Misfit from *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. The same archetypal storylines that went into these works are all also present: the rite of passage, the good father/bad father dilemma, good versus evil, the unveiling of “the One.” My use of these archetypes was both genuine and ironic; I hoped to reinforce the conventions that come with these same stories while simultaneously subverting them. My method for this approach was crude at worst and simple at best: put all of these stories and all of these characters into the

blender and press “puree.” Once they were broken down, I was able to rearrange them, under the guise of realism, into my own story. What I hoped to accomplish (and still hope that I did) was a mosaic, built from the scraps of my favorite stories. My intention in doing this was twofold: to demonstrate that these stories are all, in the end, very much the same, and secondly, to create the sort of flexibility that would allow me to undermine some of those conventions (despite Goose’s efforts to become “the One,” he ultimately fails).

In many ways, because of this, *On Stony Ground* is just as much a work of “fan fiction” as it is an original work. I took the opportunity to *play*. This idea of fan fiction is the most rudimentary introduction to the novel, I think (I hope to show that it became and becomes far more complex), but it is an important starting place. On the subject of fan fiction, author Michael Chabon says:

Through parody and pastiche, allusion and homage, retelling and reimagining the stories that were told before us and that we have come of age loving – amateurs – we proceed, seeking out the blank places in the map that our favorite writers, in their greatness and negligence, have left for us, hoping to pass on to our own readers – should we be lucky enough to find any – some of the pleasure that we ourselves have taken in the stuff we love: to get in on the game. All novels are sequels; influence is bliss. (45)

I can’t stress enough how liberating that last little phrase, “influence is bliss,” was for me. Throughout my education, I have constantly been bombarded by some variation of Harold Bloom’s idea of “the anxiety of influence.” I heard the phrase so much, honestly, that eventually I began to believe it, seeing myself as some sort of martyr poet who only wanted to create something truly original. I’m not sure why I wasted my early twenties slaving over

originality. Most of my “original” ideas, it turned out, had already been done by a handful of authors over the last hundred and fifty years. I remember one point in my early career as a “serious” writer vividly. While gazing out my window, brooding over a super-reflective state primarily concocted of marijuana and Lacanian concepts of the Symbolic, it occurred to me that the best way to reach the truth in fiction was to – and hear was my truly *original* idea – use multiple narrative perspectives. I would give money to see Faulkner’s response to my genius. I have loosened up considerably, though, in a long grooming process that prepared me to write this novel. I was able to free myself of the pretentiousness (or what *I* see as the pretentiousness) that goes with Bloom’s idea of the poet, and was able to just start writing stories again, stories willfully influenced by my favorite storytellers, stories that had fun paying homage and twisting the words of others. Those stories eventually culminated in *On Stony Ground*, which thus far has been my most ambitious attempt to revel in influence.

In the closing sentences of my favorite novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (I offer no apologies or qualifiers for my favoritism), Huck briefly touches on his possible plans for the future: “But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can’t stand it. I been there before” (307). This statement has always led me to great speculation. What would it be like to see Huck in Indian Territory? Could you imagine? (I say to myself). Part of this speculation, I think, comes directly from my love for the character of Huck Finn. He has taken up a place in my imagination alongside some of my greatest heroes for as long as I can remember (it was read to me by my mother, at the age of six, on a long ride from Oklahoma to Pennsylvania and was one of the first books I ever read, along with a biography of Jim Bridger and Hawthorne’s terrifying and impossibly dense *The House of the Seven Gables*). There was

(and is) Huck Finn, Luke Skywalker, Barry Bonds, Fiver, Peter Venkman, Robin Hood, Michael Jordan, Peter Pan, Sherlock Holmes, and Moses, among others. The desire to see Huck roaming my home state, free and rearing for more adventure, was a direct result of the character's palpability and the fact that in my mind he was as real as it got. Twenty or so years later, I had the opportunity to set Huck free again, not just in my mind, but also on paper.

The novel was not originally a direct response to Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Eight or nine years ago (the early 2000's tend to blur for me), I came across a novel called *Rule of the Bone* by a man named Russell Banks (he has since become one of my favorite contemporary authors). The novel opens:

You'll probably think I'm making a lot of this up just to make me sound better than I really am or smarter or even luckier but I'm not. Besides, a lot of the things that've happened to me in my life so far which I'll get to pretty soon'll make me sound evil or just plain dumb or the tragic victim of circumstances. Which I know doesn't exactly prove I'm telling the truth but I wanted to make myself look better than I am or smarter or the master of my own fate so to speak I could. The fact is the truth is more interesting than anything I could make up and that's why I'm telling it in the first place. (1)

I was completely mesmerized by the voice, and read the entire novel in one sitting in my car, parked on the side of the road by Boomer Lake in Stillwater (the novel actually received the weakest reviews of any of Banks's works). The spoken word narrative goes on to tell the story of Chappie, or "Bone," a fourteen-year-old runaway that does whatever it takes to

survive in a number of small towns in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. Bone dealt with a number of serious issues – drugs, sexual abuse, abandonment – but none of them came across melodramatically (these issues can be dealt with seriously, but often times come across *too* seriously). Banks was making use of the same device that Twain used in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Salinger used in *The Catcher in the Rye*: dramatic irony. Specifically, extreme dramatic irony wrought from the mind of an innocent, young mind.

Shortly after reading this book, I left Oklahoma in a drug-addled stupor, thumbing my way across the American West, dropping out of school, finding myself, and terrifying my family and anyone that wanted to see me alive. During this period, I began my first attempt at a novel. A stupid, untitled work that never made it past a hundred pages. It was dark, existential, and, again, stupid. Very serious stuff. A coming of age masterpiece that ended when the drugs and money ran out and I got bored and scared and wanted to go home. My impulse, though, my desire to begin my hopeful career as a novelist with a coming of age story about the wanderings of a young man stuck with me, and it wasn't until I could clean myself up and shed that "serious" idea of the writer that I came back to Banks and realized that a boy was what I wanted to write about. A boy, whether ten, twelve, or fourteen years old, made a great hero (for me, at least), and was the perfect vehicle with which to create the dramatic irony needed to deal with the sort of violence and depravity that I wanted to address. Between the spoken word and a young boy, I was set. Here is an example from *On Stony Ground*:

I pissed myself. It was about the most embarrassing thing I'd ever done but as soon as he said he'd fucking kill me I kind of lost control of every part of my body

and I felt my own lap getting warmer and Dad must of realized it too because he looked down at the piss and then looked at me with this look of disgust.

“Oh, you little pussy,” he said.

When he said this he let go of my throat and pulled the gun away but I didn’t move on account of the gun still being cocked and him waving it around. (75-76)

Hopefully, this passage, with its spoken word and its boy narrator, is more effective than it might appear with the distance of an adult or third-person narrator (“The boy urinated and his father looked at him with disgust. ‘You’re a pussy,’ he said. He was angry”). I’m sure this point-of-view can be pulled off, and pulled off well, but the use of a boy makes it much easier to avoid melodrama. This passage takes place in a hotel room where the father is cooking meth. How could I address this with only adults? The naivety of the boy narrator, balanced with his worldly street smarts, allowed me to describe horrific conditions without ever getting too serious. The audience, of course, sees the horror, and this is the source of the dramatic irony.

When I began to take literature seriously (and by seriously, I mean began to study it and write about it), the Romantics captivated my imagination far more than anyone. For some reason, the younger Romantics – Byron, Keats, and Shelly – never quite meshed with my sensibilities, but Wordsworth and Coleridge, on the other hand, arrested my worldview and essentially changed it forever. The ideas of (and I’m generalizing here, of course) reacting against reason, of looking for God in nature, and privileging “spoken” language over poetic language sparked a line of thinking that I still haven’t recovered from (and hopefully never will). It wasn’t until I discovered William Blake, though, that I began to consider

myself a “Romantic” of sorts. Blake was unlike anything I had ever seen, read, or thought before. In his ideas I found a convergence of religious, political, and aesthetic theories that were my own, but that I’d never been able to articulate simultaneously. Frankly, I’m not sure that Blake articulated them that well, either, but over the course of reading his body of work with a little help from Northrop Frye, I slowly began to understand – he understood the idea of Eros over Thanatos (and the necessity of both) a century before Freud.

As my fiction writing began to develop, and I began to read more and more, my interest in Romanticism followed its natural and historical course: to that of the Gothic (Poe became a favorite) and eventually and more specifically to the Southern Gothic. In the southern writers I found, essentially, everything I could ever have wanted: the transmogrified, fallen world of Faulkner, the grotesque and otherworldly characters of Flannery O’Connor, the beautiful and flawed vernacular of Welty. There are plenty of others who influenced me as well, but the tradition of southern Gothic has galvanized my writing career; I’ll never want to write another thing that doesn’t some way play with the ideas of Southern Gothic.

Specifically, it was the work of Eudora Welty that made me want to write about Oklahoma. A strange idea, I know, but there was something about the voices she used, the stories she painted through vernacular, in *The Golden Apples* that completely changed my idea of storytelling. The moment I read, “That was Miss Snowdie MacLain. She comes after her butter, won’t let me run over with it from just across the road” (263), I was hooked. Since my introduction to spoken word narrative, I’ve had a difficult time ridding myself of it. I don’t venture out into the third person very often; it seems to me that voice is the most direct way to develop character, to shape story.

I recognized something in the voice of the southern writers, whether it was Eudora Welty or William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor or Katherine Anne Porter, which seemed akin to the sorts of voices that I grew up around in Oklahoma. *I can do that*, I thought. I can tell stories about real Oklahomans using their real voices. This idea incited a series of short stories, all of which took place in the little town of Livingwell, Oklahoma (a town that would eventually morph in to Cimarron) and were almost all told through the local vernacular of children, construction workers, pedophiles, retail managers, and ghosts. I wanted to tell these stories, really, for two reasons. First, I was at an age when my own identity was something that I was failing to find in the sky and beginning to find in the soil (a transition, I hope, that can be seen in *Goose*, as well). I had begun to question the ridiculous resentment that so many other Oklahomans experience in their youth ("I hate this place," or "I can't wait to get out of Oklahoma"). Oklahoma wasn't such a bad place, I was starting to realize, and it was also a place that I had the power to recreate through my own work (whether for me or for an audience). I soon began a romance with the state that has yet to end, and I hope *On Stony Ground* accomplishes what I attempted. Secondly, I thought it was a new idea. No one had ever really written about Oklahoma, I thought, and it was my opportunity to utilize the culture of my youth to mine places that hadn't previously been touched by literary voices. This was, of course, before I knew anything about Rilla Askew.

I had been grooming my Okie voice before I came to the University of Central Oklahoma, and was sure that whatever I did as a part of the MFA program here was going to be part of my "master plan:" to take over the world with some sort of new, Oklahoman voice. When I came to Edmond, however, I was shortly introduced by the work of Rilla Askew by another student in the form of *Strange Business*. Apparently, someone had beaten me to it.

Even more, she had done it far better. Bible camp, raccoons, a snake wrangler - why didn't I think of any of this? I put my bitterness aside and read *The Mercy Seat*, which further defeated me. Askew had tackled the historical, too, all while maintaining a voice that was somehow still familiar to me. My jealousy quickly subsided, however, and I began to feel encouraged; writing from and about Oklahoma was doable, and I now have a measure against which to weigh myself.

Although *On Stony Ground* reaches back to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from a stylistic standpoint, it owes much of its structure and purpose to Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away*. O'Connor's second and final novel is broken into three distinct sections: Francis Tarwater running away after the death of his prophet great-uncle, Tarwater making his way to the city to live with his atheist uncle and mentally handicapped cousin, and Tarwater returning to Powderhead – the home of his great-uncle – to return to his inheritance as a prophet. The novel directly follows the pattern of the parable of the prodigal son: leaving the father to live a hedonist lifestyle amongst a greater population and returning to his former state with the father.

O'Connor was a Catholic writing from within a place known for its extreme Protestantism. Although the old man Tarwater was a Protestant fundamentalist of sort, he represented a sort of Catholic ideal for O'Connor, a Christianity connected to nothing but God, unaffiliated with any earthly church. O'Connor claims "the modern reader will identify himself with the schoolteacher, but it is the old man [Mason] who speaks for me" (350). O'Connor's concept of grace (a very violent grace, indeed), ultimately brings young

Tarwater back to his place as a prophet and a man of God. The hunger he experiences throughout the novel is eventually satiated in what O'Connor calls a "minor hymn to the Eucharist" (372). Although the ending of *The Violent Bear it Away* may seem tragic to the contemporary reader (the boy, after drowning a mentally-boy and being raped, is doomed to live the same life as his crazy, prophet kin), it is ultimately a triumph of O'Connor's Christian ideal.

On Stony Ground is also structured in three parts (The Father, The Son, Up in Smoke) but is based upon another parable, the parable of the sower. Both parables concisely describe the Christian ethos, but with completely different tones. The parable of the prodigal son is a celebratory tale – the son returns to a feast and understands the unconditional love of his father. The parable of the sower, however, explores a much more deterministic (and pessimistic view, I believe) of the Kingdom of Heaven. The same seed is distributed equally, but the circumstances of the individual (the wayside, the stony ground, among thorns, and good ground) determine the end result. The product of the seed (the Word of God) is a direct result of the predetermined social circumstances of the individual. In Goose's case, because of the dysfunction and instability that he grows up in, the seed takes, but is unable to grow because there are nowhere for the roots to grow. In the case of Tarwater, violence is exactly what brings him to God; for Goose, the violence that surrounds him is exactly what makes him unable to find God.

Goose *does* find God (in a way), however, and that is where *On Stony Ground* diverges completely from *The Violent Bear it Away*. O'Connor was a Catholic in a Protestant world, but her gripes were not specifically with Protestants. Although she does find problems with it, she ultimately prefers it to the secular, atheist world of the

schoolteacher, who directly echoes the voice of the devil (the disembodied “friend” of Tarwater). Like O’Connor, I’m from a heavily protestant part of the country (Oklahoma), and was even raised Southern Baptist (sometimes it was Baptist, sometimes it was some sort of fundamentalist, nondenominational Christianity that I couldn’t tell apart from Baptist). I find it necessary here, as inappropriate as it might be, to address my own religious views, as they are central to *On Stony Ground* and, more specifically, to its relationship to *The Violent Bear it Away*. Like O’Connor, I am a religious outsider, albeit one on the opposite end of the spectrum. I am liberal Quaker (although the Inner Light knows how long it’s been since I’ve been to a meeting) or at least have some sort of Quaker sensibilities. As such, I am at the other end of the spectrum from O’Connor’s Catholicism, but equally as removed from the fundamentalist Christian center that dominates this part of the country.

It is through this universalist, tradition-less Christian model that Goose does come to “find God.” While Tarwater’s spiritual journey finds him leaving “the Church,” entering “the World,” and returning, Goose’s journey is turned inside out; he leaves the world behind to find a better way, only to return to the world. From a structural standpoint, this happens in a number of ways. Goose’s “devil,” unlike Tarwater’s friend, does not echo the ideology of any particular evil. The Deer Woman represents a sort rationalism that Goose ultimately embraces. Although she seems like and advocate for evil, her suggestions reflect Goose’s human impulses. Killing his own father would be wrong, but she’s right in many ways; no one that read a news story about a boy killing an abusive father that had him trapped in a meth lab would feel anger towards that boy. Her other admonitions that he should return home to his family, be a normal boy, and accept the fact that he is nothing more than a sinner

(as opposed to the “chosen one,” which his grandfather has convinced him that he is) are advisements that he listens to (unlike Tarwater, who rejects the voice and is saved forever).

Who, then, embodies evil in *On Stony Ground*? I’m not entirely sure. If I’ve done my job well, I hope that everyone does. Goose’s mother’s neglect is evil, his father’s criminal behavior is evil, his grandfather’s fanaticism is evil, Kirby’s abusiveness is evil, Curly T’s threats are evil. Even the Goodwin brothers, who appear to be the “purest” sort of evil in the novel, have some sort of rationale for their behavior. Every character in the novel exists on a sort of spectrum, with Henry reaching as far as a human can to innocent and the Goodwin brothers reaching as far as they can to evil. But every character is evil; every character exists on the spectrum and is therefore responsible for the state of the world that makes up *On Stony Ground*. While O’Connor creates a world in which good and evil exist outside of individuals, I hope to have created a world in which good and evil are parts of everyone. It is Goose’s final recognition of this, his acceptance of his wrongdoings that ultimately led to the death of his best friend, which saves him. *On Stony Ground*, I hope, is a novel about the rejection of systematic theology rather than a rejection of any sort of religious hope or freedom. This places it in direct opposition to *The Violent Bear it Away*, which posits religious acceptance as the path to freedom. If *The Violent Bear it Away* is about the violence inherent in grace, *On Stony Ground* is about the grace inherent in violence.

Finally, I’d like to establish what I have come to understand as my primary goal as a writer of fiction: entertainment. I have always felt that, in some way, my job as a fiction writer was to be a source of pleasure (*plaisir*) for the reader. My goal is to put on some sort

of act – a performance that requires active engagement between the writer and the reader. Out of this relationship comes pleasure, and out of that pleasure, entertainment. Entertainment, for me, is the highest calling for a writer – far above philosophical insight, above Truth, above social consciousness, above profundity, above whatever. I don't mean to downplay those things (and hopefully I've accomplished some of them with *On Stony Ground*), but I believe that if an author fails to entertain, he fails

Already possessing these convictions, I was pleased to find them articulated with far greater acuity by Michael Chabon. I was first introduced to his ideas on the relationship between entertainment and literature in his introduction to the 2005 edition of *Best American Short Stories*. I later came across the same essay (albeit a slightly edited version) in his collection *Maps & Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands*. Chabon claims that most “literary” folks have developed a disdain for entertainment, a word that many associate with “karaoke and Jägermeister, Jerry Bruckheimer movies, a *Street Fighter* machine grunting solipsistically in the corner of an ice-rink arcade” (1). This view, however, is a “narrow, debased concept of entertainment” (2). Although Chabon's essay speaks specifically to short stories and the general, unfounded disparagement of genre fiction on the part of more “scholarly” writers, I believe the concept is transferable to all forms of the story, including the novel. We have, in some ways, come to a critical point in which stories, for some reason, must be positioned in one of two camps: serious art and superficial entertainment. One would never put *Ulysses* in the same category as, say, *The Muppets Take Manhattan* or *Twilight*. And rightfully so, of course. The only way to fix this disparity, I believe, is to alter the fiction writer's response to the idea of entertainment. Chabon puts it eloquently: “The best response to those who would cheapen and exploit [entertainment] is

not to disparage or repudiate but to reclaim entertainment as a job fit for artists and for audiences, a two-way exchange of attention, experience, and the universal hunger for connection” (5). This was my primary goal with *On Stony Ground*.

As someone trying to entertain, I had no standard by which to create other than to imagine what would entertain *me*. Because of this small fact, I can say that writing *On Stony Ground* was some of the most fun that I’ve ever had. I loved writing this novel, and I hope that someone will eventually enjoy reading it as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it. Every decision I made as a writer came out of my attempt to have fun, to push the boundaries of what was believable, to entertain. I remember a moment, when, halfway through the first draft, I hit a bump in terms of the logic of the narrative. Henry’s grandmother had up and died, and I wasn’t sure what to do about the body (on a number of levels). I was standing in the living room, explaining this all to my then wife (who wasn’t listening), when it occurred to me: *Goose and Henry have to bury the body*. I loved the idea, and couldn’t imagine writing anything more exciting than an amateur funeral. My novel writing instructor, Dr. Steve Garrison, once said something to the class that has stuck ever since. It was something to the effect of, “if you’re not sure what to do, create conflict.” Although I’m not sure whether or not I’ve taken his adage too far, I do know that I’ve had fun doing it. Every bit of conflict in *On Stony Ground*, whether it be an angry, overdosing meth addict, a shootout in an old farmhouse, or a Native American legend come to life, has been fun to write.

Looking back on the experience of writing and revising *On Stony Ground*, I’ve found that the greatest accomplishment of this novel was that I simply began to learn how to write a novel. Despite my best efforts to subvert this or reinforce that, to examine whatever or

entertain whomever, the final product of this novel was truly an education. This education was the real joy behind writing my first novel. Two years and roughly three hundred pages gave me plenty of time and space to explore, to screw up, and to attempt to fix. I was able to learn through experience what worked and what didn't work (more than not, what didn't work). I learned that a novel is not always a labor of love, but sometimes just a labor. I learned that character's actions must always be justified, that physical space must always be accounted for, that if you put someone in a green t-shirt in chapter three, you better write it down, because when she comes back in chapter eighteen, you're not going to remember what color her t-shirt was (this is only a concern, I think, if you're writing about methheads, who never seem to change their shirts). I think that the greatest lesson I learned, however, was that a novel is doable, and writing novels is something that I will continue to do. I'm already excited about my next novel, which has turned out to be about a hardboiled detective searching for Sasquatch in the very same woods where Goose and Henry buried Henry's grandma (I'll deal with the ridiculousness of it all later).

On Stony Ground has not just been about education, however. Over the course of two years, the characters in these pages have sprung fully to life in my mind, and have become cauterized in my imagination. I came to love them. When I realized, sitting in front of the computer, that Henry had to die, I had to hold back tears. This novel might sit in a drawer the rest of my life, but I know that I have achieved something if not just for myself; Goose and Henry, Mom and PaPa, Dad and the Deer Woman have become as real to me as Huck Finn or Luke Skywalker. My hope is that they'll come to mean that much to someone else.

Works Cited:

Banks, Russell. *Rule of the Bone*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1995. Print.

Chabon, Michael. *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands*. Haper Perennial, 2008. Print.

O'Connor, Flannery. *The Habit of Being*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. Print.

Welty, Eudora. *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1980. Print.

Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the birds of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, some a hundred. He said unto them, He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

-- Mark 4:3-9

Part I:
The Father

Chapter 1

I knew that my life was basically going to be completely different from then on when I stuck Curly T Pearlman's hunting knife in his own back and saw Mom mouth the word "Go" and I ran out for good. I've still never figured out whether I was kicked out or whether I was running out, but I'm not sure that's really the point of the story, whatever that might be.

Everything started when me and Mom got kicked out of our house in Garden Street, which is where all the poors and the blacks and the speedheads live in Cimarron, Oklahoma. That's where I'm from. We had to move out to Cimarron Storage – unit G39. I know what you're thinking: what kind of people would live in a storage unit? All I have to say is, if you have to ask a question like that, you must've never fallen on hard times yourself, or at least never had a problem with meth.

Mom just came home one day and told me we had to go.

"Get you things," she said. "They're coming for us." When I asked her who was coming for us, she just screamed at me. "*They* are!" The way she said *they* was a sure sign that she was tweaking, so I did what she said. You don't want to mess with Mom when she's

all tweaked out – she can get nasty mean. She starts acting real ambitious like she owns the world or something and is right about everything.

So we ended up leaving most of our stuff – the stuff that Mom hadn't pawned off already – and settling in to this storage unit that Mom said belonged to my grandparents, MiMa and PaPa, who were dead. I thought it was a little strange that dead people would own a storage unit, but I guess it kind of makes sense. Where else are you supposed to put the stuff no one wants after you die? Mom said it would be a good place to stay until everything blew over with the drug court. She promised she'd get clean again and that we could move back into the house. I believed her, too, because I'd seen her do it before right after Daddy got sent up to McAlester on account of cooking crystal.

In those days, me and Mom were like best friends. She pulled me out of Mrs. Bumpass's third grade class when she got back on the crank and told them she was going to homeschool me or whatever. I wasn't sure what that was, exactly, but I learned pretty quick that I didn't have to go to school and I basically got to just hang out with Mom when she wasn't out with men or partying or looking to score more stuff.

Mom was beautiful then, too. She was real skinny like people on TV and had this long red hair and bright green eyes that pretty much turned black when she was spun. People used to tell me that I looked like her, except, of course, for the fact that my hair is short and I'm a boy and I have this pretty big scar that runs up the left side of my face and up into my hair. I don't know where I got it, but every time I asked Mom would tell me a different story. Like I got in a fight with a wolf once or I flew through the windshield when I was a baby. It used to bother me that she wouldn't tell me, but then it hit me: a scars only as good as the story you put it with.

I guess I should probably introduce myself: my name is Goose. And don't waste your time telling me it's a strange name, I know. Mom said she gave me that name because her water broke when she was at the movies with Dad watching *Top Gun*. Mom says that even though Tom Cruise is by far the sexiest man alive – even sexier than Dad, she says – that Anthony Edwards was the smart one. He was a doctor on TV, too. Six hours later I came. They gave me a real name – one that I hate so much I'd never as much as mention it – but Goose is the name that stuck.

The fact I got a nickname might explain how you don't know who I am, too. I was pretty well known around here that summer. You might remember it – it was the summer that the Goodwin Brothers escaped from McAlester and all those boys came out and said that they'd been felt up by a bunch of priests. It was the summer that I was basically on my own. A dark summer: especially for me. Of course, if you remember the Goodwin brothers, than you probably remember hearing about me. But that doesn't matter: you probably won't remember my real name – no one ever does – and besides, I'm the only one that really knows how everything went down those hot months.

Living in that unit wasn't too bad except for there was no air conditioning or lights. But it didn't bother me much because I was with Mom, who was staying as clean as she could and finding us food during the day. Plus on top of that if you left the door cracked a little bit you got all the light and breeze you needed. There was all this cool stuff in the storage unit, too: a big chest of drawers, weird old clothes and jewelry, and a green, velvet couch. Sometimes I'd imagine that I was staying in this big luxury hotel and Mom was the room service and I had everything I'd ever wanted. Mom said we were lucky that MiMa's

jewelry was there. Otherwise we'd starve. I never knew MiMa or Papa, but living in their stuff sort of made me feel like I did. I liked to imagine PaPa as this big, strong guy that had fought in maybe a couple wars and maybe even commanded his own fleet of airplanes or something even though Mom always said he was a total creep and she was happy that he was dead and I never met him.

There was this giant, dead tree – I don't know what kind – right outside of our storage unit. It was especially weird because the rest of Cimarron Storage was a total cement wasteland. The tree had these giant roots that had cracked the cement and made it look all twisted and gnarled. Me and Mom were sitting out under that tree, eating bologna sandwiches she'd bought at the Whistle Stop, when she told me why I couldn't ever leave the unit.

“There's just too many people out to get you, Goose,” she said. The bread stuck to the meat when I tried to pull it back to put on some Miracle Whip. There was Dad to worry about, she told me. He'd just got out of prison and would take me away if he ever found me. She picked at her sandwich but didn't really eat it. Her eyes were dark. She told me that my father was a horrible man and it was his fault that she'd gotten mixed up with the crank to begin with. I already knew all this but didn't understand what it had to do with me.

“What's he want with me?”

“Well you're his son, you know? Feels entitled or something, though he shouldn't. I put in all this hard work to raise you while he sat on his ass in prison, eating meals at the expense of the taxpayer. Never sent us a dime. Maybe when he sends me some money I'll let him have a look at you.”

She pulled a pack of Virginia Slims out of her pocket and put one to her mouth only her hands were so shaky that she couldn't light it right and I had to do it for her.

"Then there's CPS, those kidnapping sons of bitches."

"What's CPS?"

"Child Protective Services. They want to take you away, too. It's a government conspiracy. They want to take kids away from their *subversive* parents and brainwash them. Make them think like the government wants them to think. It's part of the same conspiracy that changes all the textbooks. That's why I took you out of that school." I knew there had to have been something fishy going on in that school. "The government gets to edit the books. They take out all the bad stuff and make themselves look good. Most people don't know that. That's why they want you. So they can take you and reprogram you without all the bad stuff. It's kidnapping. Only a child's mother can really take care of him the way he needs to be taken care of." She gave me her bologna sandwich and I fished another pack of Miracle Whip out of the plastic sack. I was glad I had Mom and wasn't strapped to some table in a government office, getting probed and told what to think through their textbooks.

"Don't worry," I told her. "I'm not going anywhere. Dad and the government can't find me out here." She looked at me with her dark eyes and ran a hand through my hair.

"It's not just them you got to worry about, Goose. You got to worry about the Deer Woman, too. Especially out here where no one can see us."

"What's that?"

"The Deer Woman is a curse that goes way back to when the Indians lived here," she said. Indians still lived around there, I knew, but I didn't say anything on account of the fact that maybe it was something that the textbooks told us and not the truth and I didn't want to

look ignorant in front of Mom, so I just listened. “She can change shapes, between an old woman and a deer and a beautiful young woman. But no matter what her shape is, she always has hooves for feet.”

“What does *she* want with me?”

“You’re exactly what she needs to survive, you see. That’s what she does. She lures in young boys because they think she’s a beautiful woman or a sweet old grandmother and then she kidnaps them.”

“What does she do with them?”

She took a long drag off her cigarette and the ash fell down the front of her shirt. I could see her tongue moving back and forth inside of her mouth.

“Nobody knows,” she said. “But no one ever sees the boys again. She tracks them down at first by peeking in windows. That’s one of the reasons I’ve got you out here, of course: no windows.”

“If she can change shapes, how are you supposed to know if it’s her or not?”

“You don’t. That’s why I have to keep you hidden out here. From your father and the government and the Deer Woman.” She snubbed out her cigarette, which she’d only taken a couple drags off of and wrapped her arms around me. She wheezed when she breathed. “I won’t let anyone hurt you, baby. Ever.” For some reason I felt myself growing into the roots of the old tree and those roots were taking me down, farther and farther, until I was in the center of the earth and there was no way out.

That night I couldn’t sleep. I don’t know where Mom went off to but I was alone, just lying there all sweaty on that velvet couch, thinking about everyone that was out to get me. Every time the wind rattled the metal door I flinched. I imagined myself growing down

with those roots and Dad and the government and the Deer Woman all digging as fast as they could at the soil to get down there and find dig me up.

After about a month at G39, Mom started disappearing more often and when she was with me, men started coming around. A different man would come every day or two – sometimes they came together. They would make me sit outside on the dead tree. I didn't want to think about what was going on inside, but I decided that Mom knew what was best and she was doing what she had to do to keep us together and me safe. When they closed the metal curtain I would stretch out and read one of my books. Even though I didn't get much schooling or anything, I always loved to read, even when I wasn't supposed to be reading and eventually I sort of became a junky for science fiction. At one point – when we were living on Garden Street – I had a pretty wicked collection. Mom sold most of them, though, for what she could get. That and the VHS player and all or VHS tapes. I'd managed to sneak three out in my backpack when we started to run. They were these novels based on the *Star Wars* movies. We couldn't afford the actual VHS tapes, so Mom had bought me the books.

“They're supposed to be just like the movies,” she told me and she kissed me on the head, something I always pretended I hated. I couldn't believe I had to read the books instead of seeing the movie like everyone else got to, so I didn't get around to them. I was thankful enough for them when I got out of that house with basically nothing and had to find something to do while Mom did her business. She said they had to come because MiMa's jewelry was all gone and when I asked her where it had all going she just sort of started crying, except without tears, kind of a deep, hard sob that she couldn't control. I decided not to ask her about the jewelry or the men after that. After all, she was doing her best.

Those books became my favorite thing in the world – outside of Mom, of course. I know this might sound stupid and like something you’ve heard from ten million kids, but I thought like I was Luke Skywalker. He didn’t have a dad either and had all these bad people coming after him. The thing about Luke, though, is that he didn’t just hideout in Cimarron Storage. He went after those people on account of his higher purpose – that being the Force. A kid like me doesn’t get access to a thing like the Force, though.

I was finishing the first book when I met Curly T for the first time. He banged really hard on the metal door and then started yelling.

“You in there, Lily? Lily! Where you at?” He banged a few more times although I don’t know why he was making such a fuss – the door was unlocked and even cracked open.

“She’s not here!” I yelled back. He had me so on edge that I thought for a second that maybe he was my Dad or someone else that might take me away and I regretted opening my stupid mouth. I saw his hand reach under the door – he had on all these gold rings – and pull up. He pulled so hard that the door slammed overhead and rattled the whole unit. He looked startled when he saw me.

“Lily here?” He was a short man but he had lots of muscles – like a pro-wrestler except not all roided out. His face had pockmarks and his hair was all spiked up and he had on black jeans and a black tank top that showed his hairy shoulders. He also had this pretty crazy belt buckle that was a giant bronze snake with a red jewel of some sort for an eye. He spit on the floor and the room filled up with the smell of Copenhagen. “I asked you if Lily was here. Are you deaf, boy?” He started rummaging through MiMa’s chest of drawers, throwing the clothes all over the room. A bright, floral shirt landed on my head.

“And I told you that she’s not here. Are *you* deaf, boy?” I stood up and my book fell off my lap and onto the floor. My chest got big and my arms tightened and my fists all clenched up when I said it. He had his back to me but as soon as I stood up and said it he froze for a second before he turned around real slow and propped his elbow up on the chest of drawers. He pushed his sunglasses back on the top of his head and stared at me and I noticed for the first time that his eyes were basically black just like Mom’s. After standing there and staring at me for what seemed like forever he took a few steps towards me and slapped me right across the face. It stung in more than one way. I tried to back away but he grabbed me by my t-shirt and pulled me all the way up so that I was looking him right in the black eyes.

“You tell me where the bitch is,” he said. “You hear me?” I thought about telling him the truth for a minute – which was that I had no idea where Mom was – but I decided against it. After all, he could’ve been from the government or working for Dad or something and I didn’t want him knowing that I was Lily’s son. So instead I just spit in his face. He sort of lost it after that. He threw me down on the ground and slammed his boot down in my stomach which made me gasp for air and even throw up a little bit and he pulled this hunting knife out of his pocket that had part of an antler for a handle. I tried to wriggle my way out from under his foot even though I could barely breathe but he just pressed down harder and harder until these black rings started closing in around the edges of my sight and I was for sure that it was the end of the line for me.

He must’ve decided that stabbing a kid was a bad idea because instead of stabbing me he pulled his foot up and tore into the couch. He slashed it all over and it was all I could do to catch my breath and not cry any louder than I already was as he yelled and swung his arm

over and over at the cushions. After a while he quit and just stood there breathing real heavy and staring at me with those wild, crazy eyes. He put the knife back in his pocket and I relaxed a bit.

“You tell Lily that Curly T Pearlman is looking for her.” I nodded and he walked out, leaving the door wide open behind him.

After he left I tried my best to clean up the mess that he left. MiMa and PaPa’s clothes were all over the floor along with some photographs and half of the stuffing that had been in the couch. I folded the clothes as nice as I could and put them back in the drawers. The pictures were mostly from their owe trip to Yellowstone, a trip that Mom had told me about a bunch of times. I had seen them all before from days when I was bored and had been reading *Star Wars*.

There was one, though, that I’d never seen before. The picture looked all yellow and green like most pictures from the seventies do and it had a man on a motorcycle in it with a woman sitting behind him. I could tell pretty quickly that it was Mom on the motorcycle except she looked fatter and younger and a generally healthier. I flipped the picture over and it said “Tom and Lily 1985” on the back. Tom was my dad. I flipped it back over and looked real hard at his face: he had long, black hair and high cheekbones and a leather jacket – just like something out of the movies. Mom had a smile on her face but he didn’t. My guess was that he was trying to act tough – something Mom had always said she hated him for. I tucked the picture in my book and made sure that all my books were back in my backpack. Maybe I thought the picture would be a good thing to have. Maybe I would

recognize him when he got out of prison and maybe Mom was wrong about how messed up he was and maybe he could help protect me from guys like Curly T.

That night Mom returned – tweaked out of her mind, no question – but she was with someone. It was a man. I could hear it through the door. I was glad it was dark, though, because at least it would be cool outside if she made me sit under the tree. I nearly jumped ten feet in the air when I saw who it was: Curly T. When I saw him with his snake belt buckle and his gold rings and his six pack of beer, something went off inside of me like a firecracker or one of those caps that you put in your gun when you’re a kid. Without even thinking, I charged across the room and tried to hit him right in the balls as hard as I could – I wasn’t going to let him hurt Mom. I missed, though, and my fist came down right on top of his belt buckle. He just laughed and offered me a beer.

“Feisty little fuck, are you?” My hand throbbed real hard and I wondered if I’d broken it. I moved in closer to Mom. I pulled on her arm but when she looked down at me her eyes were so glassy and dark they looked like they were gone. Her knees were bouncing and she kept scratching her elbow – I’d never seen her that bad in my life.

“Now don’t be rude, Goose,” she said. “This is my new *boyfriend*.” She reached up and gave him a kiss, real nasty like, with her tongue inside his mouth. He reached down and squeezed her backside until she let out a little yelp. After she kissed him, he took a long sip from one of his beers and put his arm around Mom’s shoulder.

“You see what he done to the couch?” I pointed back at the velvet mess that was supposed to be my bed.

“Now you heard your mama, you little fucker. I’m her *boyfriend*.” He laughed at me again and I could feel the hate boiling up inside of me but since I wasn’t a Jedi and didn’t have the Force or nothing, I couldn’t do anything about it. It just spread, like a fire, and I thought again about becoming part of those roots and being trapped in the center of the earth.

“Why don’t you go ahead and wait outside for a while, honey, while Curly T and I take care of some grown up things,” Mom said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said. I stood there with my arms crossed, trying to look real serious like my dad. I wasn’t going to let that asshole do anything to hurt Mom. He laughed again and Mom looked at him, sort of embarrassed, although her face was hardly showing any emotion again. He sat the beers on top of the chest of drawers and pulled that knife back up out of his pocket. Mom reached for his arm but he only knocked her down on the couch.

“You want to go for real this time, kid?”

“Come on Goose, just go outside,” Mom said. “Nothing bad is going to happen.”

“I’m not going anywhere until *he* is out of here,” I shouted. Mom got down on her knees on the floor to talk to me at my level but Curly T pushed her to the floor again and picked me up the same way he had that morning and shoved me against the wall and started waving that knife around under my neck.

“What’s your problem, kid?” I couldn’t say anything because by that time I was crying real hard despite my best attempts not to and when snot finally came out of my nose he started laughing. “You want to know what your problem is, kid? You just don’t get it. You don’t get that your mama doesn’t want you. You’re just a pain in her ass. Nobody

wants you – that’s why you’re out here in this goddamned storage unit. Your mama’s moving in with me, see, and I don’t want you either.”

That’s when Mom jumped on his back and we all three went to the floor in one pile. Me and the knife went one direction and Mom and Curly T went the other. He started yelling at her and before I knew it he was up on top of her and hitting her in the face and she was crying like she does without any tears and he was starting to undo that snake belt buckle with the one hand he didn’t have on her throat and before I even knew what I was doing I’d stuck that knife of his right in his back beside his shoulder blade and he was flailing and screaming and Mom was just stared at me. That’s when she said, “Go” with her lips. I grabbed my backpack and ran out of G39 and Cimarron Storage as fast as I could.

By the time my legs gave out I was already in town, and I decided maybe I should get inside and around some people despite the fact that my dad could be there or government workers. But now I had Curly T to contend with, too, and I knew he couldn’t do anything to me if I was around people so I went to Sachel’s Diner, which is this greasy spoon out on 33.

I sat at the breakfast bar inside and pretended not to be completely panicked and watched the small TV mounted on the wall. I hadn’t seen TV in what felt like forever. It was the news, and there was a story about how the Goodwin brothers – these two guys that had murdered their mom and dad and tried to rob a 7-11 outside of Oklahoma City – had escaped somehow from the state prison in McAlester. No one knew how they did it, yet. The waitress gave me a menu and I ordered milk and a Western omelet with hash browns and biscuits and gravy despite the fact that I didn’t have a single cent on me. I tried my best to hide my hand from her on account of it still being bloody from Curly T’s belt buckle. As I ate my food – the first real food I’d had in forever – I thought about going back but new I

never could. I knew I'd have to fight my dad and the government and Curly T and whatever else might be out there, even if it was the Deer Woman. No hiding. I wasn't afraid anymore – I'd gone too far to be afraid of anything anymore.

Chapter 2

Once I'd put all that food away and my stomach felt like it was going to split wide open right there in the diner, I had no idea what I was going to do about the bill. The waitress, who seemed sweet enough at first, was starting to give me looks like she knew what was up, so I ordered a coffee because it seemed like something that normal people would do after they were done with a big meal.

"Aren't you a bit young for coffee?" she asked me. She was starting to get sweet again and when she smiled at me I noticed that a couple of her bottom teeth were missing and I wondered if she'd been hanging out with a guy like Curly T. I just gave her my best *don't ask any questions* look and turned my mug over so she could fill it up. Her smile went away and she filled up my cup. "You sure you're supposed to be out this late, kid?"

"I'm doing just fine," I told her. "I'm just waiting on my dad. He drives a truck and sometimes doesn't get in until late." Apparently my look didn't do much.

I sat there in the diner for another thirty minutes being nervous on account of drinking too much coffee and not knowing what to do about the toothless waitress and the way she kept eyeing me from the cash register at the end of the bar. My mind was racing the whole

time about what I was going to do about Mom, too. I figured I needed to rescue her from Curly T and all, but there was know way I was going back out to G11 – not alone and not after stabbing that creep in the back. You’d think I’d feel pretty good about stabbing him on account of what he did and the fact that that’s pretty action hero of me to stab someone, but to tell the truth I felt miserable about stabbing a body. Just downright crummy.

On top of all that, I was basically a sitting duck there in that diner, which is right out on 33. Cimarron isn’t that big, you see, and highway 33 is basically the main road in town. All you really got to know about Cimarron is this: there’s 33, which runs right along the river and is where all the fancy businesses are like the diner and the Dollar General and the Motel D and the Sonic we’d just got – that’s where all the people driving through on the highway stop – and then there’s the rest of the town, on the other side of the river, which is split right down the middle by Main Street.

I was sitting right on 33, where everyone and their dogs could drive by and see me, sitting there with my back to the entrance eating food and drinking coffee that I couldn’t pay for. If the government or Curly T came looking for me I was screwed. I was trying my hardest to look tough, though, just like Dad in that picture, and thinking about how Dad might be the only one that could help me. I knew that Mom said he would take me away, but I couldn’t help but think that he didn’t look that bad sitting on his motorcycle with Mom. I also knew that Dad would be keeping a low profile, too, on account of him just getting out of prison and everything and probably being into some shady business or whatever ex-cons do when they get out. Folks that have people out after them are sometimes the best people to have on your side when you got people out after you just as bad. I had to find him.

Then my way out of the diner came. This horrible rain started and didn't stop for a long time like the whole world was going to drown and the wind was blowing hard – like Cimarron wind does – in a way that could make a heavy chain flap like a flag. People started coming in out of the whole mess and standing by the window, telling each other that it was the worst they'd ever seen, even though they said that every time there was a nasty storm. Everyone in the diner got up out of their seats, too, to crowd around the window. I got up like I wanted to see what was going on only I slipped out the front door and ran to the far end of the building and hid under the awning. You couldn't tell if it was coming down or busting up from under the ground – all I can tell you is it looked like the sky was going to collapse and Cimarron would be lost forever.

I could see the toothless waitress through the window, looking around like she knew I'd blown the joint, so I lit out across the street towards the Circle D and the rain was coming down so hard it hurt and there were already puddles in the street that soaked all the way through my shoes and socks all the way down to my bones. When I got to the motel I ran around to the backside and ducked under the awning. It's a funny thing – you never stop to appreciate a think like an awning until it's raining and you got nowhere to go. The parking lot was empty except for a sixteen wheeler that was parked across a bunch of parking spots. That's when I struck it rich and found the door to number forty cracked open with no one inside.

I only figured there was no one there on account of the beds being made, which is something that only maids and stuff do when you're gone. The room was yellow and smelled like smoke – there were even butts in the ashtray. I checked out the bathroom and there was nothing there but clean towels so I took off all of my wet clothes and dumped them

on the floor in front of the TV and wrapped myself up in the towels like rich people do when they're lounging around their hotels and ordering room service. I even wrapped one around my head like Mom used to when we lived on Garden Street and had a shower.

I flopped down on the bed and turned the TV on and flipped through the news channels to see if there was anything about a missing kid yet but all there was were these updates about thunderstorm warnings and flash floods and the Goodwin brothers. No one had found them yet and there was already an award out for any information that might lead to them getting put back in prison.

I turned the TV off and thought about what it would be like to find Dad and ride with him on his motorcycle out to Cimarron Storage and help him beat Curly T to a pulp and take Mom and ride away. I was a realist about the whole situation – I knew I wasn't going to be able to get Mom and Dad back together or nothing – but I was sure that if he loved her enough to put me in her that he probably loved her enough to kick Curly T until he bled. *I* wanted to, I knew that much. The rain was still pouring down outside and beating on the window pretty hard and I just sat there in the dark thinking about what I'd say to Mom if me and Dad ever rescued her. I saw a spider crawl across the TV screen just as I fell asleep.

I didn't wake up until I heard the door open and shut and when I jumped up every single towel I was wearing fell to the floor and I was just standing there, naked as the day I was born, trying to cover myself up with my hands. Henry Quarters stood in the doorway.

Henry Quarters is one of those people that everyone in town knows about, whether you're poor or rich or black or Indian or a methhead or a Baptist. I don't know what his real last name is, but everyone says it's Quarters on account of the fact that he's got a knack for

collecting spare change wherever he goes. It doesn't matter whether you're at the Whistle Stop, the Simple Simon's, the Video Den, or anywhere: you might see Henry down on his hands and knees, feeling around under counters and in cracks between magazine racks for money.

To be honest, I was a little afraid of him on account of him being a retard and the fact that I'd heard from Benny Wellington at school that he'd eaten his own mother. He said he and his mom went down into the storm shelter in their garage, and when the tornado hit their house it flipped the car clean over and right on top of the shelter door. When the detectives and doctors and what not realized that there was a storm shelter in the garage after looking at the blueprints or something, they moved the car and opened the door. When the light shown down on Henry he had blood all over his hands and his mouth and his eyes were all crazy and he was crying. And his poor mom was just lying there at the bottom of the shelter, dead and without any arms. That's pretty messed up, but then again Luke Skywalker did have to crawl into his own Ton-Ton for warmth. I guess that just means that sometimes you have to do the best you can with what you got.

He'd moved to Cimarron from Stillwater once his mom was eaten or dead or whatever. Which makes sense because Stillwater is full of strange things like professors and Asian people and folks that get their coffee from places that aren't their kitchens. It's only like a half-hour away and where all the high school kids go to get drunk on the weekends. Or so I'd heard. When Henry got here, he moved in with his grandma – which no one knew anything about because she never left her trailer in Piney River Mobile Homes. I guess you can say that Henry Quarters is sort of a local legend – only he hasn't done much except be stupid and eat his mom and look for change everywhere.

So there I was, naked, and my first instinct was to yell at him. You have to yell at stupid people sometimes, just like you do with foreigners.

“What are you doing, pervert? You like looking at naked boys?” I waved at him to get out with one hand and kept myself decent with the other.

“I – I’m here – I’m here to vacuum the floors and change – change out the towels. That’s my job here. Vacuum the floors and change out the towels. But you were wearing them – you were wearing them. So I’d rather not touch them, if you don’t mind.” He looked away like he was ashamed or something and I reached for my clothes, which were still wet, and put them back on. Henry was about six and a half feet tall and his beard was starting to grown in, so he looked a little funny in this short blue maid’s smock that had frills around the neck. “What – what are *you* doing here?” he asked.

“I just needed to get out of the rain,” I told him. “You aren’t going to call the cops or nothing, are you?” I figured he didn’t know how to use the phone but I wanted to make sure he didn’t draw any more attention than was needed – which was any. “Go ahead, come on in,” I told him. “Quit standing in that doorway.” He had to duck a little to come through the doorway. “Name’s Goose,” I told him, and I reached out to shake his hand. He took it and squeezed real hard and shook it like it hadn’t been shaken in a long while and needed it.

“My name is – my name is Henry. You are not – are not – supposed to be here. That’s why I’m here cleaning. Vacuuming the floors and changing out the towels. Vacuuming the floors and changing out the towels is my job. I think I’m going to have to tell my manager about this. You ain’t supposed to be here.”

“Listen,” I told him. “Don’t tell no one about me. If you do, they might take me away and cut me up and reprogram me.” I figured the truth was the best place to start.

“What?”

“You heard me. The government is out after me and if they catch me they’re going to reprogram me so that I won’t love my mom and I won’t ever believe she loved me. See, she does meth sometimes and has these wicked money problems. I’m not saying the two are connected, but –”

“You – you a Christian?”

“What?”

“You follow the Jesus – the Lord Jesus Christ?”

“I don’t know. Never gave it that much thought. I guess, maybe.”

“Good enough, I guess. Good enough.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I just like to know – to know, you know – these kinds of things about people. Everyone has to be born – born again – you know – to see the Kingdom of God.”

“I didn’t know that,” I told him. Great, I thought, that’s just what I need: some sort of crazy, stupid, cannibal religious nut.

“Well you should. Those of us that’ve been baptized - been *baptized* – got to spread the word. It’s the Great Commission.” I didn’t know what he was talking about but I guessed I did sort of fall under the heading of everyone, so I listened. Even if he was a religious nut, I didn’t want him telling anyone that I was squatting in that hotel room.

“You going to say anything to anyone?”

“I – I guess I better not, seeing as you’re sort of a believer and all. I have to help out a fellow brother in – in Christ. That’s not to say that I wouldn’t help someone that wasn’t a believer, I just – well – well, you know, you got to help your brother in Christ.” I was happy

he wasn't going to say nothing to the manager, even though I sort of felt bad about letting him think I was his brother in Christ and all that, so I tried to make some conversation with him.

“Did you ever hear of the Deer Woman?”

“Is it – is it in the Bible?” he asked. It told him no and he said that he believed in no such thing then. “Sounds like how the Greeks – the Greeks and the Catholics worshipped idols and spirits and that – and that – black magic stuff that was here when the earth was new. Those are pagan things – pagan things.” That made me feel better, actually, and I decided maybe she really was like one of the made up species on Tattooing or like a comic book character or something that the Indians made up to scare their kids for whatever reason Indians have. By that time Henry had sat down in the chair by the bed and was real interested in the conversation.

“You seem – you seem to know a lot of different stuff. Like you went to school – to school or something,” he said. “I don't know much about nothing, except what Grandma – Grandma – tells me. And of course David, my manager. He lets me work nights sometimes. Grandma says it's good I do something. Otherwise I'd drive her crazy – drive her crazy. What about you? You got nowhere to go?”

“I was staying with my mom but her and her new boyfriend kicked me out. Right out on the street. Can you believe it?” I thought about telling him I'd stabbed Curly T but I thought maybe it'd upset his Christian sensibilities seeing as how trying to kill someone is against one of the Ten Commandments or something. It upset *my* Christian sensibilities and I didn't even have any.

“A kid like you? That doesn’t seem like – that doesn’t seem like – like the Christian thing to do.” I was a little irritated that he called me a kid since I was technically on my own and kid’s aren’t on their own, but I didn’t say anything, especially since he was feeling sorry for me any everything, which, to be honest, felt pretty good. Henry seemed like a nice enough guy – I was starting to believe that story about him eating his mom might not be true. “You got a scar – a scar – on your face,” he said. “How’d you get that scar?”

“It was a boating accident,” I lied. “I was driving my dad’s speedboat out at McMurtry, showing my mom and dad a good time, when all of a sudden we hit this big wave and I went flying. My head hit the water just the right way and it tore my face clean off. Doctors said it was a one in a million shot. They had to sew my face back on. That scar is where all the stitches were.” I hoped the lie would impress him, but it didn’t.

“I saw a guy on TV that had his face sewn – sewn – back on. The say it’s a standard operation.” That made me burn even more, even if I was lying.

“Maybe in France or some such place, but not right here in Oklahoma. I was on *News Channel 5* with Linda Cavanaugh.” The Cavanaugh bit finally scored one with him.

“Linda Cavanaugh? Grandma says there ain’t a woman – ain’t a woman – in Oklahoma with as much class as Linda Cavanaugh.” He stood up and went outside and came back in with some towels. “Listen, this is the last room I got to – got to put towels in. Maybe you could come back home – back home – with me. I mean, you don’t look like you got a place to go, and I expect Grandma – Grandma would like to meet someone that knows Linda Cavanaugh.” I told him I thought it was a good idea. I was glad that I could come up with such a good lie on the spot like that, even if it did make me sort of feel bad on account of him being so nice and probably not even a cannibal. Even if he *was* a religious weirdo.

There wasn't anyway anyone else would offer to help a runaway like me, at least not the way I was starting to see things. Plus I knew I'd be safe from Curly T and the government and whoever else must've been looking for me by that time.

It was dry outside by that time and the wind was cool and it smelled like the way growing things smell when they get wet. It was dark but the little light that was left from the sun was trapped between the earth and the clouds and made this strange orange glow mixed with all of these other wonderful colors everywhere that I couldn't name even if I wanted to and for a while it almost felt like a fresh start. Henry didn't have a car on account of him not being able to drive so we walked on the shoulder of 33 out towards Piney River Mobile Homes.

And that's how I met Henry.

Chapter 3

Piney River Mobile Homes was about two miles west of town and could be found next to the Cimarron River about a quarter mile down this pretty washed out gravel road that didn't look like it'd been taken care of in about a million years. Henry and his grandma's trailer was number three and it sat on a sand lot right down on the river, which meant it was basically about as far as you could get from the entrance of the park, which was basically just this giant collection of mailboxes and orange boxes for the newspaper. All of the trailers were surrounded by these pretty tall evergreens, which is where I guess they got the name for the place. Henry's trailer looked like someone had tried to paint it yellow once and the front steps were made out of cinder blocks that led to a red door that didn't have a screen or nothing.

When we got inside I was surprised at how big the place was, at least compared to the storage unit. The living room and the kitchen were this one big room and Henry and his grandma even had their own room at the opposite sides of the trailer. There wasn't much furniture, though, except for this pretty nice couch that had pictures of hunters on it and a coffee table that was covered in Mt. Dew cans and a kitchen table, which had all of these

coins stacked on it – some of them in neat little stacks and some of them in big piles. There was a plastic contraption in the middle and a bag full of brown papers.

“What’s all this?” I asked.

“That’s where I sort and roll all of my coins – my coins. So far I have three hundred. Three hundred and seventeen cents. Seventeen cents. Grandma helps me count it sometimes. When she’s not busy, of course. I like to roll them up – roll them up in stacks – when I’m not working or taking care of Grandma.”

“I can’t believe you got almost four hundred dollars from picking change up off the ground.”

“I did find twenty dollars – a twenty dollar bill – at the Whistle Stop. And a five-dollar bill at the Donut Stand. Of course – of course – I did the Christian thing and told the people working that I found them but they both said they was mine because I found them myself. Myself. Plus, you’d be amazed how quick change adds up. If you think about it – think about it – it only takes five or six quarters to make a dollar. Or maybe eighteen dimes. I think – I’m pretty sure.”

“Is this your room?” I asked. I turned the handle to the door next to the kitchen and cracked it open but Henry came up behind me and pulled it shut.

“That’s Grandma’s – Grandma’s room. We shouldn’t bother her because she’s usually asleep by now. It’s night after all – after all. We got to keep it quiet until we go to bed. My room’s at the other end.” He pointed across the kitchen/living room at the other end of the trailer. I started to get real nervous at that point because I was pretty sure the whole reason he’d brought me back to his place was to tell his grandma all about Linda Cavanaugh and me meeting her and all and I remembered the story about him maybe eating

his own mother and wondered if he was up to no good, being a retard and all, and for a second I thought about splitting.

“You coming?” He had his door open and was motioning for me to come in. I knew it was a dumb thing to do but I followed him in and when we got inside his room he closed the door real softly and held his finger up to his lips like I was supposed to be quiet.

“Why do we got to be so quiet?” I asked him. “She’s all the way across the house.” He got in his closet and climbed up on top of a plastic milk crate and just about the time I was ready for him to pull down a bunch of severed heads in a plastic bag, he pulled out this cardboard box with a big “C” on it and dropped it on the ground. Whatever was in there was heavier than human body parts because it thumped pretty hard and sent dust flying up in the air and that’s when I noticed that the wood paneling on the walls was all rotten around the top like the place had been upside-down once, floating down the Cimarron. It smelled like it, too, but it wasn’t intolerable because they had so much space. Henry climbed down with another box about the same size and dropped it on the floor next to the other one. That one was marked “BC.”

He opened up the first box and told me to take a look. It was full to the brim with little paper rolls of coins. Some said “QUARTERS” and some said “NICKELS” and some said “DIMES.”

“Henry Quarters,” I said, a little relieved at how what was in the box wasn’t as evil as I’d imagined. He didn’t seem to hear me or to care as he tore open the top of the second box.

“These are my bottle caps.” The box was filled with metal caps from beer bottles. “These wash up on the river bed, just by the house. Mr. Williams down at the recycling place said that if I got two boxes like this he’d give me fifty dollars.” I had no idea you could

get so rich just off of other people's trash but I didn't want to look stupid so I just told him it was neat.

“So why do you want all of this money?” I asked him. It didn't make much sense to me to collect a bunch of money without using any of it. What's the point of money if you aren't going to spend it on something good? I remember thinking quite a bit back when I was with Mom that if I had some of the cash that she got for working with those men and pawning her things that I wouldn't blow it all on meth and cigarettes. I'd get a CD player or another VHS player and maybe even get the real *Star Wars* tapes. Meth's only there until it's gone, but you can watch *Star Wars* as often as you got time for.

“Grandma says – Grandma says when she dies they won't send money from the government anymore and they'll probably put me away somewhere – somewhere. So I'm trying to save up as much – as much- money as possible so that I can get out on my own when she dies and I won't need the government.”

“No kidding?” I said. “So we both got the government after us. If I were you, I'd stop taking those checks right now so that they can't find out where you live and take you away right now. People like us, they got a knack for hunting us down and then reprogramming us so that we're acceptable to other folks. It's like a conspiracy or something. They call it DHS.” Henry ignored me for a while and put the boxes back up in his closet. “And why do you need that crate, anyway? You're a tall guy. You can't reach the top of the closet?”

“I keep them hid real good – real good. They don't go in the closet. They go in the space above the closet. Up on top of the ceiling. And the DHS isn't any conspiracy – conspiracy – whatever that means. They're who gives me my checks.”

I knew something funny was going on to begin with, him being so weird and hiding his grandma from me and all, but as soon as I found out he was working for DHS I knew I had to run. I started for his bedroom door but as soon as I got to the doorway, he stood in front of it and grabbed me by the arm which sort of reminded me of the time Curly T grabbed me and pinned me up against the wall and so my first instinct was to kick and when I did I caught him right between the legs. He went right to the ground and for a second was actually my height.

“Where you – where going?” he asked. He had his hands on his balls and was sort of rubbing them and I felt bad for a second but then remembered that he wasn’t my friend and was only some crazy retard out to capture me and cut me up or sell me down the river to a bunch of government agents that couldn’t wait to get their hands on me. That might’ve been his job – to hang around that hotel and catch all the runaways and keep the town cleaned up and stuff. In exchange for that they let him be a retard out in public and not in an insane asylum or wherever they put people like that. “Your mom kicked you out – kicked you out. I know you don’t got nowhere to go. Why would you kick me in the balls – in the balls like that?”

“You work for them,” I told him and I kept looking back between him and the front door and the only reason I didn’t split was because my backpack was lying around somewhere and that was definitely something I didn’t want to leave behind, especially because it had the only picture of my dad in it and my *Star Wars* books on top of that.

“Work for who?”

“DHS.”

“I don’t work for them,” he told me. “I just get – I just get checks to help me out since I don’t work much. They’re helping me out. They’re helping me out.”

“And you don’t kill people? Eat them and all that?” He just sat there, on his knees, rubbing his crotch and leaning on the doorframe with this miserable look on his face that reminded me of what people look like in the movies when they find out their kid died or something.

“I don’t kill – I don’t kill no on. That’s a commandment. *Thou shall not kill.* Besides, I wouldn’t even want to.”

“So why should I trust you?” We had both wandered into the living room and I kept looking for my bag and realized I must’ve left it in Henry’s room. “And why did we come here to see your grandma and then all of a sudden your grandma isn’t available and all that? Wouldn’t that sound a little fishy to you?”

He finally stood up and went into his room and when he came back he had my backpack, which I snatched out of his hand pretty quick and then looked him in his eyes.

“I just made that part up about my grandma liking Linda Cavanaugh so you’d come out here. I thought it might be nice to have someone to talk to – someone to talk to.”

“You lied to me?”

“I’m sorry.”

He put his head down real pathetic like a puppy almost and that’s when I remembered the boxes that he’d showed me and figured he must trust me for sure if he’d show me where he basically kept the treasure buried in his house and I felt awful terrible about the whole thing even if he did lie to me, which didn’t really matter anyway because the lie he told was basically based on a lie I told, even though I wasn’t ready to tell him yet that I was a liar, too

“Sorry I kicked you in the balls,” I said.

“It’s alright,” he told me. “Sorry I made you think I was a murdering government worker and all that. And about lying to you – lying to you. Lying’s a sin, you know?”

“And you’re right about me not having no place to go, too,” I told him. “I’m trying to find my dad now.”

“I thought you knew him,” he said. “You said you were showing him a good time on that speedboat.”

“That was a long time ago. You think this scar healed overnight?”

“I guess you don’t have to be very old to drive a speedboat,” he said. “I bet they’d never let me drive one, though.” I sat my bag down on the ground and pulled out the picture of my dad on the motorcycle.

“That’s him,” I said. “You ever seen him around? He just got out of prison not too long ago.” He checked out the picture and then shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know. I figure – I figure I’ve seen a guy like that down at the motel now and then, but he didn’t drive no motorcycle. He shouldn’t drive a motorcycle anyway – anyhow. Those things are dangerous. And he’s not even wearing a helmet. I’ll tell you what, though – if you’re looking for something – you should use the Internet. The Internet has the best way of finding things. That’s where my manager David found his girlfriend.”

“What’s the Internet?”

“The Internet is this computer that they have at the public library. You just get on there and the librarian can help you find stuff – find stuff. All you have to do is sign up on some paper saying that you won’t look at naked women or anything that might be offensive or help you join the terrorists or make a bomb.”

“You got to sign something?” He said I did and I told him I better not use the Internet on account of me not wanting to be in the system. “Once you get inside the system,” I told him, “they can find you easier.” He didn’t seem to understand and I kind of got why he just took those government checks. He just didn’t realize how widespread the conspiracy was: he couldn’t see the writing on the wall. I told him I was sorry again for kicking him in the balls and he said it was okay and we went in the kitchen and he made me a peanut butter sandwich and gave me a Mt. Dew. Even though I’d just had something to eat at the diner, I wolfed it down pretty fast and he told me I could take a shower but I was still pretty tired so I just laid on his couch and read my *Star Wars* book. I was already on *The Empire Strikes Back* and Obi Wan was telling Luke in a vision to go to Dagobah to get trained by Master Yoda, who I imagined was tall and muscular and had these wicked moves that made Darth Vader look like a pussy.

After a while, Henry went to bed and shut his door and I didn’t have any light to read by and I didn’t want to turn a light on since everyone was asleep but me. There was a little light coming through the blinds, though, from a light outside at the top of a telephone pole. It was just enough light to see so I thought it might be a good time to snoop around the place – see if there was anything else to eat or maybe dig up some further proof that Henry was the kind of guy you can trust. It’s good to know your surroundings when you’re in a new place, that way when everything goes wrong again you know what you’re up against. At least that’s what Mom used to say.

There wasn’t any food in the kitchen drawers – just plastic sacks and pens and pencils and coupons and a bottle of what looked like liquor. As I started in on the cabinets, I noticed something I hadn’t seen when I came in: there was this shrine of Precious Moments on these

shelves that were built in to the corner of the kitchen. I closed the cabinet I was looking in and stood in front of the thing. At the center of it all was this bride and groom both holding a heart that said “50” on it. For a second I actually felt a little lucky for having a place to stay – the Precious Moments were kind of a sign, too, that maybe these people weren’t bad after all and I kind of started to relax.

Right next to the shrine was the door where Henry said his grandma stayed. The door was kind of creepy on account of me not knowing what was behind it and Henry acting real nervous about me waking her up like she was some kind of monster and the room was some kind of cave and as long as you didn’t disturb the monster’s peace it wouldn’t eat you. Something about it made me curious though so I took real light steps to the door and put my ear up to it. I suddenly got this wicked chill down my spine when I realized that she could be right there on the other side of the door with her ear up just like me – listening to me listening to her. I backed off for a second and shook off the fear before I started listening again. All I could hear was this faint whirring sound like there was some kind of tiny machine in the room but something bigger than just a fan. I thought maybe if I put my ear tighter against the door I could hear it better so I put my hands on the door to balance myself but when I did there was a clicking sound and the door pushed open and I could see inside.

The room smelled like cigarettes and everything was dark but I could still see around because of the light coming through the blinds. Henry’s grandma – or what I assumed was Henry’s grandma – was lying on a bed in the corner with her head propped up on a pillow. She had this plastic mask over her face that was attached to a tube that ran down to a green tank and a machine that was making the whirring sound and her wrinkly old face had all these blue lines through it and her hair was gray and yellow and growing in every which way

you could imagine. The way she breathed in the mask made a funny, raspy sound and it finally clicked in my head what those descriptions of Darth Vader were supposed to sound like. I couldn't tell if she was awake or not but I knew for sure when she lifted one of her arms – which was just as wrinkly and blue as her face – and pointed a finger at me like there was something terrible behind me about to reach down and snatch me. I jerked around but there was nothing. When I turned back around she was beckoning me with that same finger, so I walked towards her and told myself that everything was probably alright on account of her Precious Moments collection which was a sure sign that she was religious and didn't mean to do me any harm.

When I got closer to her she pointed at her bedside table and I realized that all she wanted was to smoke – she was pointing at a pack of Virginia Slims and a book of matches that was sitting on top of a Bible. When I handed her the pack, her fingers touched my hand and I got that shiver up my spine again and my scalp kind of tingled because her fingers were so cold and smooth like marble. When she took the mask off she finally spoke to say thank you, but her voice was raspy like Darth Vader's and as soon as she said it she started coughing uncontrollably like her lungs were full of cement and she couldn't get it out. She hacked for a while and then put a cigarette in her mouth and lit it with her blue, shaky, skeleton fingers. She took a drag and blew the smoke up into the air.

“You come home with Henry?” she asked. I told her yes and that I didn't mean any trouble and I didn't know he wanted me to spend the night when he brought me home. “Why are you wearing that mask?”

“Because I smoke too much.” She started to laugh but then the cement got caught up in her throat again and she hacked a while. She reached out with her long hand again and

pulled a chain on this fluffy, lacey lamp by her bed and I saw the room for the first time in a yellow light. It had the same water stains around the ceiling like Henry's, except the ceiling was all yellow and had these dark, brown spots on it. "What's your name?"

"Goose."

"No child is named Goose," she said, and then she had one short cough and breathed in some more smoke. "What's your real name?"

"That *is* my real name," I said. "Listen, I'm sorry to bother you. I wasn't sneaking around looking for stuff to steal or anything, I was just curious. I'll get out of here if you want me to. I mean, I only stayed because Henry said I could."

"You're not the first person Henry's tried to help," she said, which sort of made me burn on account of me never having said I needed any help. "But you're the first person to stay longer than fifteen minutes. Most people are afraid of Henry, I guess. I don't know why, though. I guess they think the way he's nice to everyone and invites them into his home is unnatural, like he's just setting them up to do something – weird." I told her I expected it was fine because they were a religious bunch on account of the Precious Moments and Henry babbling on about being born again. "I don't know anything about that born again crap," she said. She stopped talking for a while so she could cough some more and hack some stuff up. She spit up this green stuff with red streaks in it like Christmas into a cup. "I was raised Episcopalian and still am one – I just have a hard time getting to services anymore. But Henry's parents raised him Baptist. Don't know why. He loves that stuff to death – it's a shame I can't get him to his own services, even. He misses it. And the people." She coughed again but instead of taking another drag from her cigarette she held

the mask up to her face and breathed into it a while. I asked her if that thing made her feel better and she nodded. She took the mask away and put the cigarette back in her mouth.

Then she seemed like she was going a little crazy because she just kept hacking and spouting off all this random information about how she was poor and about to die and I think she might've been crying a little because her blue cheeks were starting to shine a little in the light.

“Doesn't bother me what Henry does anymore. I'm poor and might as well be dead and owe the IRS more money than this trailer's worth.” I didn't know why she was telling me all of that and wondered what she meant by *what Henry does anymore* like maybe he *was* up to no good and I didn't know what the IRS was but since it was made of letters I figured it had something to do with the government and it made me nervous because if they came looking for the money, they might find me. I also didn't have the heart to tell her that you can't be poor once you're dead because the dead don't owe anything to anyone. It seemed like being alive was her biggest problem. She put the cigarette out in an ashtray next to the lamp and put the mask back on her face.

“You mind if I sleep on your couch?”

“You can stay here as long as no one's after you,” she said, or at least I think she said, because it was hard to understand her with the mask on her face. So I lied and told her there weren't. She pulled the little chain again and everything went dark and I was kind of glad because I was tired of looking at her skeleton face even though I kind of felt sorry for her for being sick and poor and Episcopalian – whatever that means.

Right when my eyes were adjusting to the dark again, though, the room filled with headlights through the blinds and I could tell that someone was pulling up to the trailer. I

stepped to the front window in the bedroom to look outside but I couldn't see anything on account of the lights being so bright they blinded me. When they shut off I knew I was in trouble for sure because it was an old Suburban with lights on the top like a cop car even though the truck was green and I knew for sure that they knew I was there and they were going to take me away. And on top of that, no one knew I was there except Henry, so I was pretty sure that he was working for DHS after all. I wished I'd never trusted the retard to begin with.

A giant man in a brown uniform climbed down out of the driver's side and his shirt tail wasn't tucked and he was kind of staggering like someone had punched him in the face and he was singing but kind of yelling about how he shot a man in Reno just to watch him die and I knew right away that he was one of those crooked cops. They're on all the TV shows and, besides, Mom says all cops are corrupted or something.

Chapter 4

The giant, crooked cop stopped his sing-song yelling and started actually yelling.

“Henry!” he yelled. “Henry! You better wake the fuck up! Your big brother is here and he wants a hug!” I knelt down by the window and watched him get closer. Henry’s grandma just sat there in bed, breathing through her mask and staring at the ceiling. “Wake the fuck up, Henry!” He paused when he got to the trailer door and closed his eyes for a minute and swallowed real hard before he opened the door and came inside. I got on my haunches and hid behind the door so I could see what was going on. Across the trailer, Henry’s light came on and he came out of his room wearing nothing but his underwear and he was covering his eyes with the back of his hand.

When the huge cop got inside I could see that he had these huge, bulging arms that were covered in tattoos and too big for his shirt. He had a silver badge over his pocket but no gun on his belt, which had these shiny little metal tabs woven through the top and bottom like something you’d see on a cowboy. When he saw Henry he looked like he was glad to see him and he put his arms out like he wanted a hug and for a second I thought things might be okay even though he hadn’t discovered that there was a runaway hiding in the old woman

with a breathing machine's room. I wondered if he even knew there was an old woman with a breathing machine and I hoped he did, because he probably would leave her alone and that would mean I was safe.

Henry looked a little nervous but he went towards the man anyway like he was going to give him that hug but the man just pushed him and Henry fell backwards over the Mt. Dew cans, which went scattering everywhere, and landed on the couch.

“You get your Goddamned check this month, Henry?” When Henry didn't answer the guy with the giant arms and tattoos slapped him like my Mom used to slap me when I'd go into her room when she was smoking crank even though I knew I wasn't supposed to go in there. It wasn't like I hadn't seen anyone smoke crank before. The man yelled again. “I asked you if you got your check this month, Henry!” When Henry didn't answer again the man reached down and unbuckled his belt and started pulling it off and Henry started crying and finally said something, but you could hardly tell what he was saying because he was stammering and crying so much. Finally he spit it out.

“Stop it!” he said. The crooked cop character finally had his belt off and he folded it in two and started slapping it against his hand like Henry was some kind of dog and he was going to show him a thing or two for peeing on the floor after he'd been trained not to. “I don't got the check- the check yet,” Henry said. “Supposed to be here this week some time.” I looked back at Henry's grandma but she was just sitting there, staring off into space and looking like a skeleton and I couldn't believe she didn't do anything on account of Henry getting bullied by some cop and besides if he got too rough, he might smash some of her Precious Moments.

“You told me last week it was coming this week,” the man yelled.

“I thought it would – I thought it would,” Henry said. “I don’t really know. I give the mail straight to grandma and she tells me what to do with it. I’m sorry – I’m sorry. It’s hard to keep track of time sometimes – sometimes – like has it been a week or a month or six hours? Clocks are hard, you know?” Something about what Henry said made the man real angry because he finally pulled that belt up over his head and came down hard with it, landing a nice one right across Henry’s face, who was bawling and sobbing so hard I could barely recognize him. He curled up on the couch and covered his head and face with his arms.

“Now you listen to me,” the cop said as he put his belt back in the loops real careful and tucked in his shirt. “As soon as that check gets in, you bring it to me. You may not be able to read or use the phone, but you can sure as hell find me down at the casino. You hear?”

“Yes, sir.”

The big, crooked cop latched his belt tight and left, stopping at the door with his hand on the handle while he swayed back and forth a few times. He looked back over his shoulder at Henry.

“Now quit your crying and go back to bed. You know I don’t like doing this, Henry, but I need that money. Things are getting bad. I owe some people. And I know you wouldn’t want those people hurting me. You know I love you, right?” Henry sniffled and cleared his throat.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He slammed the door behind him and went outside and got in his big Suburban but he wasn’t singing anymore. After the truck spit a few pieces of gravel against

the side of the trailer and left, all I could hear were sobs coming from the living room and the whir of the machine keeping the old lady alive and miserable behind me and I felt a little embarrassed to look at Henry like that especially since he'd done what he could to help me despite the fact I'd kicked him in the balls and called him names on top of the fact that I was sort of scamming them. I felt real guilty, too, because part of me was glad that he hadn't found me and taken me away in his Suburban to get reprogrammed.

Henry got up off the couch and went outside which I thought was pretty brave because if I was him I'd probably have gone and hid in my closet. I waited a few minutes and then I went outside, too, where I found him sitting on the cinderblock steps. He had his head in his lap and he was crying.

"Listen," I said. "Are you okay?" He looked up at me and I noticed this set of pretty wicked stripes across his face and that that there was blood coming out of one of his nostrils. He tried to wipe the tears away but most of them ran down and mixed up with the blood and went in the corner of his mouth but he didn't answer me. I sat down next to him and was quiet for a while on account of me not really knowing what to say and him probably not wanting to hear it. "At least he didn't take any of your change off the table," I said and it immediately sounded dumb.

"You know what I should've done?" he said. "I should've reached out and grabbed that belt and hit him with it – hit him with it – until he couldn't move anymore." He stood up and started pacing around in front of the steps. "Next time he comes, I'm going to be ready. I'm going to set up some booby traps like I saw on that movie about Vietnam on TV. All I got to do – all I got to do – is get some string and some razor blades. Razor blades. Next

time Kirby comes it'll be his last." I was pretty impressed that he knew how to make booby traps, but I still wanted to know what had happened.

"You knew that guy?"

"That's my brother – Kirby. That's my brother." He was starting to calm down like talking about cutting Kirby up with razor blades was making him feel better. When he looked at me I got a good view of his face and noticed that his eye was starting to swell up, too. I thought about telling him that I knew family could sometimes be a burden of sorts like when Mom brought Curly T around and I had to stab him but I didn't say anything because it really wasn't about me and, besides, I didn't want him knowing yet that I was an attempted murderer.

"Why didn't you tell me you had a brother?" I asked. It seemed like the logical thing to ask instead of going on and on with a bunch of sympathies that probably wouldn't mean anything to him anyway.

"I don't see him – I don't see him – that often. He's like the game warden for the county and he only comes around when his gambling debts get so bad that he needs money."

"So he wants all your change or something?" I understood then why he kept all that money up above the ceiling.

"He just wants my checks from the government. Grandma doesn't know – doesn't know, but Kirby says if I sign my name on the back that they'll give the money to him. To him. I guess I have to because he's my brother and I have to love him and I don't want anything bad – anything bad – to happen to him and I also kind of have to because sometimes I worry maybe he'll kill me."

"Kill you? How would he do that?"

“I don’t know – know,” Henry said. “But he went over to fight the Iraqis when they attacked that country. He was just out of high school and I imagine they taught him a thousand ways to kill a man without even having a gun. My manager – my manager at the Circle D told me all about it. You have to be crafty with Muslims because they can cast spells and do black magic.” I thought the conversation was starting to make him feel a little better about getting belted in the face and I was pretty intrigued by a guy that could kill Muslims with his hands so I kept asking him questions.

“Did he ever kill any of the Muslims?”

“Don’t know. He never – he never really talked about it. But they had to train him for it.”

“Does he have a gun?”

“He’s got a bunch. I lived with him for a while before I came here and he had a whole room full of guns and even swords and he had the heads of deer and pigs and even a moose or something that lives in Canada hanging on his walls. He wouldn’t let me go in there, though. I had to look – to look – when he was gone.” We sat for a while and I pondered all the ways a trained man might be able to kill a Muslim. I’d only seen one before – his name was Omar and he worked at the Whistle Stop just outside of town and I couldn’t imagine him knowing any black magic because he basically just looked like all the Indians around town and they didn’t seem to know any magic themselves. But I was still a bit afraid of Kirby – more so than Henry – because if he really could kill a black magic Muslim with his hands he would have no problem killing a retard like Henry or a runaway like me.

I thought it might be a good time to ask Henry about his mother to make sure I wasn’t keeping time with a cannibal and so I asked him about his parents and he said they’d been

blown up in the Murrah Building, which was pretty impressive because I'd never met anyone that died in the Oklahoma City bombing. I wondered why I'd never heard that story and I figured that the cannibal story had one out because it was more interesting.

“It must be pretty weird not having any parents,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess you can say that – that.” Henry got real quiet and I sort of wished I hadn't brought it up. He told me that Kirby was supposed to take care of him after his parents died but after a couple of weeks he just left Henry with his grandma on account of his gambling and other bad habits, which seemed strange to me because Mom had habits of her own and she took care of me – at least she used to.

The light at the top of the telephone pole flickered off while we were sitting there and there was this real quiet moment where all you could hear was the Cimarron trickling below us, and you could smell the evergreens and the sky was as sharp and bright as I'd ever seen it. I remember thinking to myself that there was no way I could have counted those stars if I had a whole lifetime to do it and so I just gazed at them and thought about how everything stayed in its place even though it was flying around at speeds that I couldn't even imagine. There's something strange about the Cimarron sky – it just goes on and on and is bigger or scarier than any ocean I've ever seen on TV. I wondered for a while if there were any spaceships up there and I thought about how big the Imperial Forces were and how few of the rebels there were. Something moved way up there and I realized I couldn't really tell the difference between a star and a satellite – they were all just objects, flying through space in every direction, violent and crazy and somehow under control. For the first time in my life, I wondered if one of those stars would crash into me.

Chapter 5

So the next morning I just sat around the trailer listening to Henry's grandma breathe through the door and reading *The Empire Strikes Back* because Henry had to go to work and I had one of those crazy moments where your whole world gets turned upside-down when I found out that Darth Vader was actually Luke Skywalker's dad. I wished I could've seen the movie itself because I really would've liked to see the look on Luke's face when he realized *that*. The point is that it got me to thinking about how finding my dad might not be that great of an idea anyway because sometimes you can find out that your father's someone that you don't want to be like and on top of that something awful might happen like you might get your hand cut off.

Henry came home some time around lunch and said that it was time to get his grandma out of the house for a bit. I thought that sounded pretty nice on account of her being cooped up in that room all the time, breathing that smoky air but I was a little nervous about going out in town where people could see me but it turned out that when Henry said get his grandma out of the house for a bit that he just meant he was going to carry her out front and plop her down in a lawn chair with her breathing machine. He said it was nice to have

someone around to help because he usually had to carry everything himself and she was heavy enough. So I carried her tank and her machine outside, which Henry plugged into an outlet on the side of the trailer and he brought her out, carrying her over his shoulder with a yellow lawn chair in the other hand. It was hot as hell out but you could tell that Henry's grandma enjoyed it because she had this sort of smile on her face.

"You've got my nightgown all tangled up, Henry," she said, only she was still smiling and then she put on her oxygen mask and rolled up her sleeves, which weren't very long to begin with, and leaned her head back like she was getting a sun tan.

"Maybe you ought to put some sun block on her or something," I said, "seeing as how white she is and how hot it is out here."

Henry just smiled and said they never stayed out long enough for her to get a burn. It was basically the first time I'd really seen the trailer park in full light and I was amazed and how many trailers there actually were: only six. Three up one side of the gravel patch and three up the other side. The one next-door was a doublewide and painted this real nice blue and had a deck built on the front with flowers and stuff and everything like someone had been saving up their entire life so they could retire in Piney River paradise. Out in front of the trailer there was a German Shepherd chained up to a stake in the ground and when he saw me he started running in circles in this dirt ring he'd run in the ground and wagging his tail and I was about to walk over and pet him when I heard Henry's grandma scream from underneath her mask. I turned around to say what and when I did I felt something sharp claw at my back and heard that dog barking right into my ear and I ran so fast I tripped and fell on my face in the gravel. Henry's grandma just stomped her foot as hard as an old lady with a

breathing machine can stomp and clapped her hands and laughed. I reached up and felt blood on my forehead.

“You have to be –have to be careful,” Henry said. “That’s Moses, Mrs. Greenblatt’s dog. She seems nice enough, but if you get close enough, she’ll tear your head off.”

I dusted myself off and wiped the stream of blood from my forehead and tried to act like it didn’t hurt and before I knew it, I’d turned around and kicked gravel right at Moses, who didn’t do anything but bark louder and wag her stupid tail. Me and Henry sat up on the porch steps and shared a Mt. Dew and didn’t say anything and after a while his grandma said she was hungry. Henry went inside and as soon as he did, his grandma pulled her mask off and started fishing in her nightgown pocket and came out with a half-smoked cigarette and lit it.

“You sure you don’t got any sort of angle here, kid?”

I didn’t know what she meant by angle but I figured she didn’t trust me in general so I got up off the steps and offered her a sip of the Mt. Dew. I didn’t think she’d take it on account of old people not liking soda, only healthy stuff like water and juice, but she took it and tilted it back and when she drank it a bunch of soda ran out of the sides of her mouth and down her neck and the collar of her nightgown got all wet. She handed the can back to me but I just looked at it and sat it back down on the step.

“I don’t have any reason to be here save Henry helping me. And he says it’s nice to have someone out here to help with things. Like getting you out here in your lawn chair.” She laughed and took a pull off of her cigarette and exhaled through her nose and started hacking pretty bad and when she did that, Moses started barking again and I wanted the old lady to know I was sort of on her side so I picked up a piece of gravel and chunked it at the

dog, only I missed and the gravel hit the front door of the trailer and before long this lady that looked like maybe she was Mom's age came out and started yelling about who in the hell do I think I am throwing rocks at her trailer. "You might've hit the dog," she said. "And who are you anyway? Why aren't you in school?"

I looked back at Henry's grandma and she dropped her cigarette on the ground and pulled the mask up for one more breath and then tore into that poor lady.

"This is my cousin's kid," she said. She coughed some more and held the mask back up to her face and when she pulled it away she was wheezing pretty bad and I felt bad that I'd gotten her in the middle of it all. "Now why don't you go back inside and mind your own business? I only get a few minutes of sunshine every day and I don't need some nosey neighbor screwing it all up." She waved at the lady and smiled real big even though I don't think she meant it and Mrs. Greenblatt just smiled and went back into her apartment. I wanted to say thanks or something but before I could the old lady had put her mask on and laid her head on the back of the lawn chair like she was dying or something.

"Lunch is here," Henry said. He came through the front door with a paper plate covered in saltine crackers and a peanut butter sandwich and I wondered if peanut butter sandwiches was all they had around there which was fine by me as long as they kept me fed and everyone was nice to me like they had been. I didn't like watching it but Henry had to squat down on the ground next to his grandma and sort of break the food up and feed it to her and every once in a while he'd take the end of his shirt sleeve and wipe at her pretty nasty mouth and then pour a little Mt. Dew down her mouth. When the food was about half gone she started waving her hands around and knocked the plate out of Henry's hand and the crackers and sandwich went everywhere and she started yelling about the IRS again and how

she wasn't going to be able to take care of Henry forever and then for some reason she started saying she wanted her husband, who it turned out was named Bill or Will or something and that's when Henry said it was time to take her inside. He hoisted her back up over his shoulder and I grabbed the tank and the machine and carried them inside. I couldn't help but notice how many crackers had been wasted and how there was still some perfectly good sandwich left on the ground. I sat all the machines inside the door and picked up the sandwich and crackers and threw them at Moses as a sort of peace offering. She wagged her tail and ate the food.

I was tired of reading for the day so I stayed outside and wandered around down by the river a little bit and thought about how nice it would be to have a place right on the river, which was way better than anywhere I'd ever lived, even if the neighbor was kind of grouchy and had a dog that would rip your face off. I sat down at the bottom of this giant oak tree that went way higher than any of the other blackjacks and evergreens around and that sort of reminded me of the tree outside the storage unit except that it was alive. I picked this rock up and started scratching at the bark of the tree on one of the roots that was sticking up out of the ground.

It was under that tree that I really started to think about what my next move was going to be. I wasn't sure anymore about whether or not finding Dad was a good idea on top of the fact that I hadn't really even been looking. I knew that I needed to help Mom get away from Curly T but I couldn't help but wonder if maybe I should be looking for a whole new gig – a place where maybe I had friends – not the idiots at school but real people that I could talk to about *Star Wars* and whatever else it is that you talk to people like that about even though I didn't know what those things were. But part of me felt like that was just a stupid

thing – like part of me was lying to myself and trying to get myself into trouble. A man's got to look out for himself and not think about things like friends even though the part of me that didn't want to listen still wanted to help Mom, who was a friend in the way that moms are friends.

I kept carving the tree bark until I could see the letter *G* real clear. The only reason Luke found out that Darth Vader was his father was because he went to the city in the clouds to help the people that he loved. When I thought that I started thinking about how much I missed Mom and how maybe being out there on my own was a bad idea to begin with. Basically, I was real confused even though you're not supposed to be confused when you're out on your own like I was.

Then I thought about Henry and how he had problems with Kirby and even though he was a retard probably deserved just as much help as Mom and that maybe if I stuck around I might be able to do something or at least have a place to sleep and some food for a while. I looked down at the *G* that I'd carved and decided that I'd stay. I'll never forget the way the first letter of my name looked carved out on that tree root. It was like I knew then that I wasn't going to find Dad or help Mom and that's just the way my life was going to be – moving from one tree to another, taking whatever shade and shelter I could find and trying not to get caught up with people like Curly T or Kirby and trying to stay under the government's radar.

The next couple of weeks or so went by pretty uneventfully. School let out for the summer which meant that I didn't have to worry as much about my low profile during the day and that I didn't have to feel like such a dropout which normally didn't bother me but

started to for some reason when I had to watch the school bus drop the kids off in the afternoons.

Henry would take me with him a couple days a week to clean rooms at the motel and I would sit on the bed and watch TV while he refilled the towels and changed the sheets and vacuumed and sometimes emptied the yellow ashtrays they had in every room. He only cleaned a couple of rooms when he went in on account of the motel not having that many customers anyway and he never ever cleaned room 39. It was the room right next door to the room where Henry'd found me and it always had a "DO NOT DISTURB" sign hanging from the handle which Henry said had been there for almost a month. I asked him why it was like that and he said it was a sure sign that some ungodly thing was going on inside but that the manager didn't care as long as the bill was paid which it was.

The first room we went to I sat right down on the bed and turned on the TV. The news was on and Linda Cavanaugh was talking to this reporter that was standing in the middle of this parking lot on another screen with a microphone. Linda was asking questions about the Goodwin brothers, who apparently still hadn't been caught though they'd been spotted in the parking lot where the reporter was standing, which was for what they called a "gentleman's club" and was somewhere in Stillwater. The reporter told Linda that there was a massive statewide manhunt and that they'd shut down highways 33, 71, and 77 because they were believed to be somewhere in or around Stillwater. Then they showed pictures of them from prison and they were in these orange jumpsuits and they were scarier looking than Kirby and Curly T combined. There wasn't anything special about them except for the fact that one of them had tattoos all over his neck that you couldn't make out and one had this red moustache that looked like he'd been growing it out for a while. Hearing about the Goodwin

brothers again made me think of that night I'd hid in the motel, which made me think of leaving Mom back at Cimarron Storage.

“What was she like?” Henry asked. I didn't answer him at first, I just sat there wondering how he could read my mind and wondered why sometimes he ran the vacuum and sometimes he didn't. I just stared at him. “Linda Cavanaugh. What was she – what was she like?” He pointed to her on the TV screen with the vacuum extension. She was sitting at the desk next to one of those floating pictures that had a smaller version of the picture of the Goodwin brothers.

“I told you she was classy, didn't I?” I acted like it was the dumbest question I had ever heard in my life. He turned off the vacuum and looked at me.

“Yeah. But you never really told me what classy meant – what classy meant. I mean, it's not like I don't know what classy means. I'm not some kind of idiot. It's just that I think you could give me an example of some sort. Yeah, an example.”

I thought about it for a few seconds and decided to tell him about the first time that Mom forgot to pick me up from school except I changed the ending so that Linda Cavanaugh came and picked me up in a limousine.

“You mean she picked you up in one of those long cars – cars – for the interview?”

“Yeah,” I told him. “She even offered me some champagne. That's what I mean by classy.” I hoped that he didn't remember that the last time I told him I had been in the hospital or that he didn't realize that I was too young for champagne even though it was pretty obvious.

“Did you know that champagne is good for cleaning out ketchup stains – ketchup stains?” he asked me. “It's real science. Real science.” Henry knew a whole lot about real

science and was always filling me in on the latest news, like too much soda will rot out your teeth, and how using bar soap to wash your hair will make your hair fall out. Doing sit-ups is bad for your back no matter how much you want to look like Kurt Russell and alcoholics can't use real mouthwash because it will make them go into an alcoholic craze and do things that they otherwise might not do. I told him that didn't matter much to me because I wasn't an alcoholic and he said it was still good to know in case I did become one and I said alright and let him feel smart even though I don't usually use any kind of mouthwash.

“So if you know all this real science,” I said, “why are you so religious and believe in being born again and all that? Seems to me you can get everything you need to know from the news and the Interweb. Did you ever think about that?” He looked at me like I was as stupid as he was.

“Science just gets ketchup stains out of your shirt – out of your shirt, Goose. It doesn't save your soul. That's what religion is for: putting your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So that when the Angel of Death comes or whatever you'll have the blood of the lamb on your doorpost – doorpost. There's nothing in the news or on the Internet that's going to protect you from the Devil. When I lived with Kirby – with Kirby – I got down on my knees and prayed to the Lord that there might be some sort of way for me to live, and He sent me grandma. Grandma.”

“Kirby sent you?”

“No, God did – did. I mean, Kirby *sent* me, because he didn't want to have to deal with me, but can't you see the Lord's hand at work in all of this – all of this? Then, when I got to Grandma's, I prayed – I really prayed – again that I might find maybe a friend or something since I didn't go to church or nothing anymore. And I got you.”

“If God know what you need so well, why’d he blow your parents up with that big bomb to begin with? You wouldn’t have needed any of those other prayers.” I regretted saying it immediately but Henry didn’t skip a beat.

“God didn’t send that bomb – bomb. An evil man sent that bomb. And think about it, Goose – if they hadn’t died, I’d never have learned to depend on the Lord – depend on the Lord in such a manner, now would I have? But that don’t matter, anyhow. The point is that the kind of science I learn on the news is only good for one thing: convenience.”

I didn’t get his point exactly but I felt pretty bad for bringing up his parents and the fact that he thought I was the answer to a prayer or something even though I was a runaway and a liar. I turned the TV up real loud so I could hear what Linda Cavanaugh was saying while Henry ran the vacuum.

Chapter 6

It went on like that – me watching TV at the motel while Henry cleaned and us both staying in the trailer and feasting on peanut butter and Hot Pockets and Mt. Dew and taking his grandma out for her fresh air– until Henry finally got his check in the mail from the government.

“Get over here,” he said. He was waving a white envelope in his hand. “Can you read – can you read this for me? I mean I know it’s from the government, because of the picture at the top, but I can never be too sure.” He tore open the envelope and handed me papers from inside and told me that he usually has his grandma read the main, but he didn’t want her knowing he was giving his check away to Kirby. “Sometimes it can get kind of hard – kind of hard to buy food when Kirby comes around looking for money, especially when I got someone – ”

“Got someone what?”

“Nothing. Just read what’s on the check.”

“It’s made out to you and it’s from the Oklahoma Department of Human Services.”

He said it was good news on account of him being able to sign the check over to Kirby and

then he wouldn't have to worry about him coming around for at least a couple of months.

"What do you do when you don't have the money?" I asked.

"Usually I can get an advance on my paycheck from work."

"Why don't you use some of the change you've collected?" I asked him.

"No – no. Not the change. I have to save that in case I have to leave." I understood that because I knew what it was like to have to leave in a pinch without any money.

So we set out on foot down 33 towards the Big Sky Casino, which is where Henry was sure Kirby was. It was hot as hell out – it wasn't even August yet or anything but the Cimarron summer was starting to set in like wet wool blanket. Two things are true about Cimarron summers: you can't leave your dog in the car without cracking the window and you can't go barefoot on blacktop. Everyone feels stupid for hating the winter and complaining about how cold it is.

I was glad to get out of that cramped trailer for a bit and onto the open road because the freedom was nice and you didn't have to listen to Henry's grandma's breathing machine or her going on and on about the IRS. I was still a bit nervous, though, on account of me being in the wide open where everyone could see me. We had to walk past the Hair Cottage, where Mom used to cut hair when I was born and also the Donut Stand and the Tag Agency where plenty of Mom's old friends from back before she got into meth worked. The problem with standing outside during the day was that everything was just so flat. That's the way Cimarron is: just plain flat. The only change around town was the small dip that led down to the bed of the Cimarron River. Otherwise, you could see all the way to Kansas save for the buildings and the few cedars and blackjacks that crept amongst the cattle. Anyone that was looking could have seen me no matter where we were going, so I tried to always keep Henry

between me and anyone that might've been looking. Sometimes Henry would ask me why I was walking so close and I would just tell him that he was good at blocking the wind.

I was glad to have Henry there to protect me, even if he was pretty stupid, and I was starting to feel bad that our relationship was sort of based on a lie. Not his lie, of course – he'd owned up to that and pretty quick, too.

“I got something to tell you,” I told him.

“What's that?”

“I never met Linda Cavanaugh.”

Henry smiled, which I didn't expect, and walked right past me and reached down on the ground and came back up with a couple of shiny coins in his hand.

“A quarter and a nickel,” he said. “That's almost forty cents.” He put the coins in his pocket and then folded his arms across his chest just when I thought the coins were going to get me off the hook.

“Now why would you lie – you lie about something like that?” I told him I didn't know and that after all he'd lied about something, too, and that maybe I thought he'd like me better or at least not turn me over to the government seeing as I didn't know anything about him at first. He said yeah, he did like me better, but he'd have never turned me in.

“I wish you hadn't lied though,” he said. “Cause lying is – lying is a sin. It's bad enough that I lied myself. Now I got to cover for both of our sins.”

I didn't know what he meant when he said that but after a while he just started laughing and he pulled me up and I rode on his back the rest of the way and I knew then that Henry was basically alright and all that stuff about him being a cannibal was probably no more true than the story of Linda Cavanaugh picking me up from school in a limousine. I

mean, I know I should've trusted him way before that on account of him letting me stay with him and his grandma being alright, but there's something about a man forgiving you for doing something wrong that means a lot more than him treating you right when he doesn't think you done anything. I know it doesn't make sense, but not much did that summer.

I was lucky to have Henry, really: anymore, he was pretty much the only thing preventing me from being totally lost. I wanted to tell him about Mom and Curly T and the storage unit and all the crank and maybe even about how we used to live on Garden Street and how I even had a VHS collection once but I knew that I'd already let on enough for one day and didn't want to risk him thinking I was a total loser.

Big Sky Casino is this giant metal building back off of 33 that doesn't look like anything until you go inside and then it looks like a whole new world or at least a cheap rip-off of one of the casinos in Las Vegas like you see on TV. When we got to the door, this skinny kid with a mustache that you could hardly see asked for my ID and Henry said it was okay because I was with him and we were just there to see Kirby.

"What do you got in that backpack?" he asked me. I showed him I didn't have anything but my *Star Wars* books and he smiled and let me in which made me feel like I was someone important.

As you walk inside the casino there's this real cool rush of air and it's dark and there's no windows so you can't tell whether it's day or night and the whole place is surrounded with all of these mirrors so it actually looks about a thousand times bigger than it actually is. It's a confusing place to be but I figure no one is there long enough to figure it

out. All of the workers were white, which I thought was strange on account of it being an Indian Casino, and they wore these red vests that made them look pretty official.

“Where are all the Indians?” I asked Henry.

“What are you talking about?”

“The Indians,” I said. “Isn’t this an Indian casino?”

“Maybe they’re up there.” He pointed up to the only window in the place, which was way up high on the wall and completely black.

The place was filled with these old women with short hair gray chain smoking Virginia Slims which reminded me of Henry’s grandma only these old ladies were in much better shape. Everyone was looking at me strange on account of me being so young or possibly because I was with Henry, who they all thought was a cannibal or a neurotic or a change collector or some such strange thing. I tried to stand between them and Henry, but they were all around me, smoking their cigarettes and pushing red buttons and staring at either the screen or me. The whole place smelled like smoke and there was a red glow that came off of the machines which all had these lights on top that looked like they came from the tops of old fashioned cop cars like I saw on Dragnet.

The machines – Henry said they were called slots – were all around the room and even went into other smoke filled rooms and they all made this noise like they were pumping out tons of change even though they weren’t. Henry was going around to all of the machines and checking them.

“You looking for spare change?” I asked him.

“These machines don’t spit back change,” he told me. “Only tickets. But you can trade the tickets in for money.” I saw what he meant when he found a machine that had a

white piece of paper sticking out of a slot. The slip said “0.34” on it and Henry put it in his pocket. All of the machines had TV screens on them and each one had different shapes on them. The row called “Balls of Fire” had these women barely wearing anything holding these cards on the screen and the row called “Diamond in the Rough” had all these different colored jewels on the screen. All of the screens were flashing bright and reflecting off the smoke that was kind of lingering in the air and I could of stayed there for hours just looking at everything but this big Indian man – the first I’d seen in the place – came up and asked Henry if he could help him.

“We don’t need anyone snooping around the machines,” he said. He looked like Omar at the Whistle Stop and I thought again about how Kirby had killed a bunch of Muslims and all of a sudden I got real nervous about seeing him again because if he’d beat up a guy Henry’s size he sure wouldn’t have a problem hurting me and plus he didn’t even know I existed and that might get Henry beat up even more.

“I’m looking for Kirby,” Henry said. “Have you seen him around?”

The big Indian flashed a smile and you could see that he had some teeth that weren’t in the right place and he put one of his arms around Henry’s neck and sort of squeezed him.

“Henry, buddy! You don’t think I recognize you? I’m just fucking with you. He’s upstairs. I’ll take you.” He led us through the slot machines and past a big green table where old ladies were all sitting around pressing buttons and looking at a half-naked woman on a big screen who was talking real sexy even though I couldn’t hear what she was saying. One of the old women at the table swiveled around on her chair and grabbed me by the arm.

“Goose?” I looked her in the face and wouldn’t you know it was Ms. Bumpass, the last teacher I’d had. She had a drink in her other hand and her body kind of shook when she

talked to me and some of the drink spilled out on her hand and it smelled like mouthwash and I thought about Henry and how he said that alcoholics couldn't use mouthwash.

“Well hello, Ms. Bumpass. How are you doing?” I smiled real big because she hated me and thought I was a brat. I wanted her to know that I liked her even though I saw her slap Benny Wellington outside of our portable classroom and besides, she'd sent me home one day for putting a crayon in the pencil sharpener. Of all the people to finally bust me and have me drug off to the government.

“How *am* I? What are you doing in a place like this?”

“A place like what?” I asked her. “I'm just here with my friend to make a delivery. Of sorts.” I smiled again and tried to look professional. “It's this new job I got, see. Me and my friend do deliveries. We deliver anything. You need a pack of smokes? Just call us and we'll get them and bring them to you. For a small price, of course.” There I went, lying again.

“What friend are you talking about?” she asked. I looked behind me and realized that Henry and the big Indian were gone. I didn't know what to do so I just jerked my arm away from her and took off towards the staircase, where I finally saw Henry and the big Indian going up towards the room with the big black window but before they heard me they were to the top of the stairs. When the Indian saw me he pointed at me and told me to stay where I was, at the bottom.

I had to wait for what felt like forever so eventually I got bored and started running up and down the stairs. There wasn't anybody around to tell me what to do anymore, so I eventually stayed up at the top of the stairs and when I finally got the courage up, I made my way down the hallway. There were rooms on both sides of me and some of the doors were

closed and some were open and the rooms that were open were filled with smoke and had big green tables in them where a bunch of men were playing cards and yelling at each other. The door at the end of the hall opened and this skinny guy with short white hair came out and I could tell he was tweaking for sure. I just stood there in the middle of the hallway and when he walked past me he bumped me in the shoulder and when he looked down to tell me to watch out, I saw the same face in that picture of Mom and Dad on that motorcycle. Except for the white hair, it was a spitting image. He walked on past me and another door opened and Henry popped his head out.

“Just a little while longer, Goose.”

“What are you doing in there?”

“Just one more minute. Two more minutes – more minutes.”

When I turned around the man with the white hair was stopped at the top of the stairs and eyeballing me.

“Goose?”

“Who’s asking?”

Chapter 7

I guess Dad didn't necessarily *kidnap* me, but I can say that he took me pretty much to the last place in the world that I wanted to be. Believe it or not, of all the hotel rooms in the galaxy, he was staying in the very room at the motel that had a "DO NOT DISTURB" sign on it for nearly a month and the one in which I had been right next door to when Henry found me, which really made me wonder if Dad had been there when I was, right on the other side of the wall. Even though my memory was sort of broken during that time with Dad, I know for a fact that the whole thing was pretty much a nightmare on account of Dad being more aggressive than I imagined on top of the fact that he wasn't there very much and when he was he was all tweaked out and cooking meth right there in the hotel room.

When we first got to the room I noticed it smelled kind of like a combination of cat piss and Mom's nail polish remover and all of the walls had started to turn yellow when it was pretty clear they had once been white, just like all the other rooms in the motel. I wasn't sure why he'd taken me there other than the fact that maybe he loved me, being his only son and all, but I found out pretty quick.

“Well, Goose, welcome to my world-famous laboratory. I’m so lucky I ran into you just like that down at the casino. As you probably know, I’ve been out of the pen for a bit now, but I was going to come and find you, I promise. I’m so happy you’re here, though. What are the chances, huh? I never took you for a gambler. I knew it was you as soon as I saw you. A man doesn’t forget his son.”

He laughed a little and I noticed that some of his bottom teeth were black. He always wore the same clothes that pretty much consisted of a pair of jeans and a white tank top. He looked pretty much just like he did in that picture: he had these big blue eyes that turned black when he was tweaking, just like Mom, and a long nose with a bulb at the top. Other than that he was short and looked just like most of the other men I’d seen before, except he had this wicked white hair that was cut pretty short. I wanted to ask him when his hair had turned from black to white but I didn’t since I thought he might be insecure about it plus I thought it might be rude on account of me not ever really having met him and plus physical looks are sort of not important anyway, I guess.

“I’m just kidding,” he said. “If this place were world famous, they’d put me right back where I came from.”

He laughed again with this sort of scratchy laugh that led me to believe that he probably smoked a lot of cigarettes. There were all these mason jars crammed on the counter next to the TV which had clear liquids in them, which I thought was probably the source of the smell and there was a bottle of antifreeze on the floor next to them. Some of the jars had these plastic tubes running in and out of them and the first one had a funnel sticking out of it and everything was covered in tinfoil and it all looked like something crazy from an old Frankenstein movie that I saw one time with Mom when we had a VCR.

“It’s not a first rate lab, but it does the job. I’m going to need you to watch out for the place when I’m not around.”

He was sitting in a chair next to the window and he pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it up, which seemed like a dangerous thing to do around all those chemicals but it was his laboratory and I figured he knew best so I didn’t say anything. I was a little curious, though, why he didn’t have any goggles or a white coat or rubber gloves like scientists on TV have.

“If this is a lab, why don’t you have any safety equipment?” I asked. “Don’t labs need safety equipment?”

It was a reasonable question, I thought, because Mom wouldn’t even let me run the electric weed eater without borrowing these goggles from the neighbor and even though they made me look like a real idiot I was glad I had them on account of me almost getting hit in the eye with a rock once, let alone work with what smelled like some pretty nasty, dangerous chemicals. Dad took another drag off his cigarette and dropped some ash on the floor. The smoke he exhaled blew in my face and made me cough a little, although I tried not to cough too hard so he’d think I was used to being around meth and people that smoked, which in all honesty I was.

“What do you know about science?” he asked me.

“I know plenty about real science,” I said, and I thought about Henry and how he said that real scientists were real careful and always used what he called “objectivity,” which I assumed meant that they were always sure to be safe around dangerous objects. Dad got up all of the sudden and pulled back the curtain and looked outside. He’d only taken a few drags from his cigarette but the whole thing had burned down to the filter and when the giant

piece of ash fell to the floor, he nearly jumped to the ceiling and made this sound that kind of sounded like a cat meowing and ran to the sink with a towel and turned the water on. Only there was this deep groaning sound and nothing came out of the spigot but this rusty sludge that looked like blood and Dad looked straight at me and gave me this look like I'd murdered someone.

“The second you get here, and things are already going wrong.”

His glare turned to a smile and I noticed for the second time that his bottom teeth were pretty black. He crossed the room and got down on all fours with the rag and started rubbing the carpet where the ash had fallen, which didn't make much sense to me because I could see cigarette ashes all over the rest of the room. He rubbed the rag pretty hard and all it did was smear the blood-colored goo into the carpet. When he was done, he threw his cigarette butt down on the floor and snuffed it out with his boot.

“You can't be too careful in these places, Goose. That's why I need you here to help me. I need a watch out. Someone to keep an eye out on all the crazies out there in the outside world. You see, they want me. And they want my godddamned product. And I'm doing my best to get it to them but sometimes they can't wait. And they surround the place like fucking zombies. 'Give us our godddamned chicken feed,' they say. Your job is to keep them away. And the cops. We've got a couple of basic rules around here, and you need to learn them. Rule number one: the DO NOT DISTURB sign *always* stays on the door. The last thing we need is that retard snooping around here, trying to change out the towels.”

I looked around and noticed that all of the towels were on the floor somewhere, and they were all brown or yellow or red. Even the bed sheet was on the floor in the cornder and

it looked like it had blood or mud or something red on it, too. Henry wouldn't have been very happy with the housekeeping situation.

“Rule number two: never turn the music up too loud.”

He pressed play on this CD player and this heavy metal sounding music started playing real loud and Dad threw a couple of fingers up in the air to look like horns or something and stuck his tongue out, which came out wicked long like a snake's tongue, which made me think of that snake on Curly T's belt. It was pretty sweet that he had a CD player and I thought that the meth business must be doing pretty good because all Mom ever had was a cassette tape player and even that she had to sell down at the pawn shop so she could buy cigarettes. Dad slammed his hand down on the thing and got real serious all of the sudden.

“Never, never, never turn the music up that loud.”

He started to laugh again.

“I tell you what, Goose. You do a good job as a watchdog and the CD player is yours, okay?”

He must've seen the way I was eyeing the thing.

“Rule number three: don't look out the window for more than three seconds. He ran to the window and pulled back the curtain and tilted his head way back and shouted, “ONE! TWO! THREE!” He pulled the curtain shut and looked at me. “You have to check outside, but don't want to draw attention to us, see? We want the outsiders to think that *no one is home*. Got it? *No one is ever home* around here.”

I thought that was a pretty good rule especially since I had so many people out after me myself but I was hoping he'd get to the end of the rules because I had to take a piss pretty

bad and I was tired and a little nervous about him yelling so much which pretty much seemed to go against everything he was telling me. On top of that he'd pulled a pocketknife out and opened it and was waving it around.

“And finally: rule number four.” He stopped waving the knife around and pointed it at me. “No sampling the product.”

He reached the knife down to this plate with all this brownish powder on it next to all of the jars and scooped some of what I figured was the meth he was cooking up on the edge of his knife and held it up to his nose and snorted really loudly and then started making these grunting noises and hacking like he was trying to get the snot out of his throat to spit it out. When he looked down at me his eyes were black like Mom's and he was laughing again.

“Remember: no sampling the product.” He laughed for a while and then got dead serious again. “I'm going to get us some food at the Whistle Stop. You hold down the fort. This will be your test run.” When he got to the door he pulled a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on and turned back to me. “And don't forget the rules. I'm counting on you.” He slammed the door behind him.

Dad leaving pretty much gave me the first chance to actually collect what thoughts I had considering all of the craziness that had gone on and I couldn't help but wonder how I'd never seen Dad even though I'd been at the motel all those times with Henry and I wondered what Dad thought of me since he'd never really ever known me.

The lab smelled horrible and there were dirty towels all over the floor and a bunch of Styrofoam cups from the Whistle Stop half-filled with this nasty black liquid and cigarette butts, which made me wonder why he put his butts in the cups because they were all over the

floor anyway. I didn't even know where to set my backpack, so I tossed it on one of the beds up by the headboard and hoped there wasn't anything too nasty up there, seeing as that was probably where I was going to be sleeping for as long as I was stuck in this situation. Dad must've been smoking two packs a day for a couple of years based on the number of cigarettes everywhere but I knew he hadn't been there that long, so he must've been smoking even more, which I already knew was the case on account of Mom always saying that if she couldn't have cigarettes, she didn't want crank, and that's pretty hardcore for someone like Mom to say. After all, she loved being tweaked.

The first thing I did after he was gone was take a piss that I'd pretty much been holding ever since the casino which made me remember Ms. Bumpass and I wondered if maybe she told anyone that she'd seen me there and then I realized that she probably wouldn't on account of her not wanting anyone to know she was there herself. The bathroom was twice as bad as the rest of the room if you can imagine that. There wasn't any water in the toilet – just the same red sludge that came out of the sink only it had dried up and looked like clay. Flies were swarming around the thing pretty bad so I figured Dad had been using it despite the fact that the water didn't seem to be working.

I didn't want to make the toilet any worse – not to mention the fact that I didn't want to get too close to the thing on account of its smell, so I just pissed in the bathtub and let some of the blood-colored water wash it own. It's not like I'd never pissed in a bathtub before and besides, when you've grown accustomed to living in a storage unit, it's nice to have anywhere to go to the bathroom besides on the dead tree outside or having to walk a half-mile up the highway to the truck stop.

I shut the bathroom door when I was done and decided to explore a little bit. Besides the jars and the tubes and everything, there was also an ice chest and a bunch of cans that looked like they might have been spray paint, though you couldn't tell what they were with the labels peeled off. On the nightstand there was an electronic scale, a syringe, a bunch of plastic bags, and a gun. It was the first gun I'd ever seen. It was a revolver, like the kind that cowboys use in the movies, and it was bright silver with a wooden handle. Down the barrel it said "Astra .357 Magnum." There was a box of Winchester 38 specials in the drawer that had been opened and the cartridges or bullets or whatever you call them rolled around the drawer when I opened it up all the way.

I couldn't believe how heavy the gun was – I almost dropped the thing when I tried to pick it up. Whenever you see the cowboys handle those things in the movies, they act like they're as light as plastic. Me and Mom used to watch this one movie, *Hang 'Em High*, when we lived back on Garden Street and had a VCR, which was one of Mom's favorite movies on account of Clint Eastwood being one of her favorite actors. She said he made a lot of movies like that one but that was the only one we watched on account of it being the only Clint Eastwood movie that came with the VCR, which she'd bought used at the Video Den. My favorite line from the movie was when the old marshal saves Clint Eastwood from being hanged. "Some people calls this hell," he says, "but you're still in Oklahoma Territory."

I said the line out loud and swung around and pointed the gun at the mirror across the room. I looked a little silly, I suppose, on account of the gun being way too big for me, but I still thought I might be able to pull off a Clint Eastwood. Or maybe even a Han Solo. That was it: Han Solo. I turned to the side and held the gun up to the sky like Han looks on the

cover of the first book and pretended like the thing was a blaster and not a six-shooter from a western. I pointed the gun back at the mirror.

“Phsew!”

I could definitely see myself wasting Storm Troopers, although the gun would have to be a lot lighter so that I didn't have to hold it with two hands, which it probably would be on account of blasters being made out of plastic or at least some kind of light-weight space material that we hadn't discovered yet, but they had way back when people were advanced in another galaxy. I put the gun back down on the nightstand and flopped down on the bed. I was pretty tired from all of the commotion and my head was starting to feel a little light, so I thought I could catch a bit of a nap. I closed my eyes and thought about Henry and what had happened to him and wondered if he'd do it again if he knew I was just going to end up in a place like this, helping a meth dealer, and that got me thinking about how if the government did track me down, I was going to go to jail for sure on account of the drug dealing because Dad would rat me out as his assistant or maybe he wouldn't because he loved me and because I was his only son and all that. Just as I was about to fall asleep, I heard a rattling at the door, which swung open full force.

“You weren't thinking about sleeping, was you?” Dad asked. He looked tired, like in the last twenty minutes he'd run a marathon and as soon as he got inside and closed the door he sat a brown sack on the table and slunk down in one of the chairs. “Because there ain't no sleeping in room 39. Don't you know that?”

He seemed to get a strange burst of energy from somewhere because he got up real quick and started pacing around the room. After a few paces, he went into the bathroom and I could hear him coughing really hard like he was about to hack something up and then I

heard him spit and I thought to myself that that bathroom was the last place in the world that I would go if I was feeling sick. When he came out he just kept pacing around and running his hands through his long, white hair like he was thinking about something although by the look on his face, he was thinking about so many things at once that he wasn't thinking about anything.

He finally sat back down in his chair and reached into the bag and pulled out one of those microwaveable sandwiches that Mom used to bring me when we were living out at the storage unit. He unwrapped the sandwich which looked like it might have been some kind of sausage biscuit or something and put it up to his mouth and when I was wondering if maybe he brought me one of those and hopefully a little mayonnaise or some salt he got this look in his eye like he suspected something was wrong and he started sniffing the thing. He stood up and gave me the most evil glare I believe anyone has ever given me.

“Did you poison this, boy?”

I didn't say anything on account of me not really knowing what he was even talking about so I just sat there and looked at him and waited for him to realize that what he was saying was crazy and leave me alone.

“I said, *Did you poison this, boy?*”

He looked at the sandwich again and then let out a howl that you only hear out of coyotes when they've been scavenging for a while but can't find any food.

“You *poisoned* these!”

He wadded the biscuit up in his hand and then threw it across the room at me. When he missed he reached back into the bag and pulled out three more of them and threw them all at me and I realized that he did get me something to eat unless he was planning on eating

four sausage biscuits himself which I doubted and then I felt bad because the first thing I would have eaten in a couple of days was being hurled across the room at me.

“I didn’t poison nothing, Dad,” I told him. “I swear, I didn’t poison nothing.”

I picked up the biscuit that had hit me in the head, unwrapped it and took a bite. It was still cold.

“See,” I told him. “I wouldn’t eat nothing I poisoned, would I?”

He didn’t seem to pay any attention to my logic even though it was a pretty good argument.

“After all I done for you, you going to try and poison me?”

His anger turned to a sort of sadness.

“I take you in, show you the ropes, and you try to kill me? Your own flesh and blood? You motherfucker! You ungrateful little motherfucker!”

By this point he’d jumped on the other bed and his boots were sinking down into the springs. He jumped off and landed between the two beds and picked his gun up off the nightstand.

“Did you think I was just going to stand by and let you poison me?”

Sweat was pouring out of him and he kept stopping to wipe it off of his forehead with his bare arm and I could smell his body odor pretty bad when he lifted up his arm.

“No Dad,” I told him. “I wouldn’t ever poison you. Where would I even get the poison?”

I immediately realized it was a stupid question when I remembered I was in a room full of chemicals but it didn’t matter anyway because he wasn’t paying attention to anything I

was saying. He reached down with his free arm and put his cold hand around my throat and pointed the gun at the middle of my forehead and cocked the hammer.

“You make a move,” he told me. “Just make a move and I’ll fucking kill you.”

I pissed myself. It was about the most embarrassing thing I’d ever done but as soon as he said he’d fucking kill me I kind of lost control of every part of my body and I felt my own lap getting warmer and Dad must of realized it too because he looked down at the piss and then looked back at me with this look of disgust.

“Oh, you little pussy,” he said.

When he said this he let go of my throat and pulled the gun away but I didn’t move on account of the gun still being cocked and him waving it around.

“You little *pussy*! Now you got piss all over my mattress! All over *my* mattress!”

He shook his head and put the gun back down on the nightstand and sat down on the other bed and put his head down in his hands and started sobbing like he was a six-year-old girl.

Dad didn’t say much only after a while he stood up and took his belt off and I was for sure that he was going to beat the living hell out of me like I’d seen Kirby do to Henry but instead he just set it to the side and went over and got the plate of brown powder off the top of the TV and came back and sat down. He scooped a little bit of the powder up in a spoon and then spit in the spoon and stirred it all up with the end of the syringe that was sitting next to his gun. By that time I was pretty sure I knew what he was doing even though I’d only seen it on TV and never in person. He picked the belt back up and wrapped it around his arm and pulled it real tight with his black teeth and after having to look for a while on his arm for

a place he hadn't already stuck himself he stuck the needle in and pressed pretty hard on the other end and his eyes turned all dark again.

"Jesus Christ," he said and he let out this moan like he just took a piss he'd been waiting three years to take. "Jesus Christ."

He took the needle out of his arm and unwrapped the belt and then he cracked his neck and rubbed his eyes and then looked at me like he had just realized I was there for the first time.

"Oh, Goose, buddy, I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry."

He got down on his knees next to the bed and took my hands into his own which were still just as cold as when he'd had one of them around my neck.

"I'm so sorry, buddy," he told me and his eyes told me he was even though they were almost completely black.

"I just get so worked up sometimes, you know? I'm under a lot of stress with the business and everything and – here – you want one of these?"

He picked one of the biscuits up off of the ashy floor and handed it to me. It wasn't the most appetizing thing I'd ever seen in the world but I was pretty much starving so I ate the thing as fast as I could before he changed his mind and took it away. He climbed up in bed with me and put one of his arms behind my head and hugged me.

"I'm so sorry, Goose. You know I love you, don't you?"

I nodded my head as I ate the biscuit.

"You have no idea how much I love you," he told me.

He buried his head in my neck and started to sob again, only this time I knew they were real tears because I could feel the warm liquid running against my neck and down into my shirt.

“I just love you so much it breaks my heart,” he told me.

I began to think that maybe I’d of been wrong about him and maybe he wouldn’t rat me out to the government on account of him loving me so much but I was still pretty shaken up from having a gun pointed at my head so I really didn’t know what to think and I just kept shoving the biscuit in my mouth.

“You know those blue eyes you got?” he asked me. “You know you got them from me, don’t you?”

I looked into his eyes but I couldn’t see any blue – just giant black holes that told me he was tweaking pretty bad.

“I bet you those eyes aren’t the only thing we got in common. But we got plenty of time to find out, Goose, because we’re going to be together now. You have no idea how much I’ve missed you, Goose.”

He buried his head in my neck again and cried and I crammed the rest of the biscuit in my mouth as I laid there in his arms thinking about how my pants were going to start to smell like piss just like the rest of the room.

Chapter 8

Well I was pretty much trapped again which maybe I should have expected on account of everything going so well at Henry's trailer. And by that I mean being free to do as I liked and having all the peanut butter and jelly I could handle and being able to help Henry roll his change and talk about whatever we wanted to talk about. Now I was stuck with Dad who I couldn't run from because I was sure he'd find me and shoot me if the government didn't get to me first and arrest me for dealing drugs and not going to school all that time and being in the casino when I was too young.

Luckily, I had brought my backpack which pretty much didn't mean anything other than that I had my *Star Wars* books which weren't very appealing anymore anyhow since Darth Vader was Luke's father and it was only a matter of time before Luke went to the Dark Side because Darth Vader was pretty much the only thing that Luke had in the galaxy, after all, besides Han and Leah who were just going to fall in love probably and forget about Luke.

On the second day I was there I saw Henry through the curtains. He was pushing his big dumb cart around with all the toilet paper and towels and he was wearing his stupid blue apron, and I wanted to say something to him or wave to him so that he'd know that I was

doing alright but I couldn't because I didn't want Henry to know I was helping Dad with the meth and besides if Dad found out I'd talked to anyone he'd shoot me for sure. There was something about seeing Henry, though, out there on the outside that made me want to leave. Not like I was enjoying being there to begin with but the truth of the matter was that I didn't really have anywhere to go if I left besides Henry's trailer which I didn't think was a good idea on account of Henry maybe not liking me anymore since he probably thought I'd abandoned him.

I was starting to feel a little funny like my head was dizzy and everything was starting to turn green like those night vision cameras you see on TV and sometimes everything would go black altogether and I'd have to lie flat on the bed to get my bearings back. As much as I wanted to leave, though, I couldn't. Dad would be back at least three or four times a day to check on me and the operation and to maybe do a little cooking or watch TV. Sometimes he'd get angry and wave his gun around and look out the window through the crack between the curtains and sometimes he'd be in a good mood and he'd want to talk to me about life or business which he said were the same thing but that was usually only right after he shot up. He liked to give the same speech over and over again about investments.

"You see, I'm a good investment," he told me. "I'm a good investment and that's why I got this business going."

He usually sat in the chair by the window when he talked to me and smoked cigarettes from end to end and checked out the window every few minutes even though he'd told me that was clearly against the rules. His talks were pretty interesting at first but then he kept giving them to me over and over again but I couldn't point out that he'd told me that

before on account of him getting real upset like he'd just found out someone died and sometimes he'd fly off the handle. So I learned just to let him give his speeches.

“Some friends of mine at McAlester seen a good investment in me, so when I got out, they set me up with the money to start up this operation. Thought we could all profit from such a venture.”

I wasn't sure what it meant to profit from a venture but that was definitely a bad time to interrupt him because he didn't like being asked about the big words he used when I didn't know them which I took to mean that he had a hard time starting his speeches over again when he was interrupted or maybe he just didn't know what the words meant to begin with.

“They saw an excellent investment in me and so they made it. And now we're all prospering. You see, Goose, I see the same thing in you that he saw in me: potential. Potential, Goose. You've got it. So I'm going to invest in you and watch you grow up like a tree and bear fruit of your own.”

Usually when he got to this part he'd get up from the chair by the window and sit down at the end of the bed where I was sitting and maybe put his hand on my foot which made me feel good because it was one of the only times he ever touched me but also made me feel a bit uneasy on account of the fact that he had held a gun to my head and told me he'd kill me.

“It's a good time to be in the meth business, Goose. Business is booming, all around the state. And it ain't going to stop there, Goose. Oh no. I got Missouri in my sights. And Kansas. That's right, Kansas. And maybe even Arkansas. I'll be overseeing a whole region.”

His eyes always lit up when he got to this part.

“But I ain’t sticking with the chicken feed forever, Goose. Oh no. I got my eyes set on better things. You know much about cockfighting? Ever been to a cockfight?”

I shook my head no every time.

“Cockfighting is the wave of the future, Goose. The Indians love that shit. Can’t wait to go throw their money away on a couple of roosters pecking each other to death. It’s no wonder it was so easy to convince them all to live here in this shit hole. Cockfighting, Goose. There’s no end to the possibilities of it. I’m going to save me up some money from all this chicken feed and buy myself a cock – know a guy in Stillwater that raises them right in his backyard.”

I started noticing after a while that sometimes the guy lived in Stillwater and sometimes he lived in Shawnee which I’m sure probably wasn’t a lie on account of it being pretty likely that there really are men raising fighting cocks in both Stillwater and Shawnee.

“But it doesn’t end with cockfighting, Goose. Eventually, I’m going to buy up some acreage right outside of town and I’m going to open up a water park. The kind with slides and a wave pool and a Big Kahuna that almost goes straight down. Just like the Sun ‘n’ Fun in Ponca City. Remember when me and your mom took you to the water park in Ponca City?”

To tell the truth I don’t remember going to any kind of water park, but I nodded my head ‘yes’ so Dad wouldn’t get upset and do something that he might regret or that might hurt me. The part that always scared me the most about his little speech was when he told me that he knew Curly T and that Curly T was helping him sell his stuff down at the casino. The thought had never crossed my mind that Dad might be in with some of those people at the casino, but after all it kind of makes sense on account of a town like Cimarron not being

big enough to support too many meth cooks all at once. The first time he told me that I was so scared that I had to interrupt him.

“Does Curly T ever come around here?”

“Oh, no. Can’t have them coming around here, drawing attention to the operation,” he told me. “I go to Curly T at the casino – that’s how I found you.”

“Does he know I’m here?”

“What do you mean ‘does he know I’m here?’ He don’t know who you are to know who you might be to be here to begin with. No he doesn’t know you’re here. At least he won’t until he comes by at the end of next week.”

I didn’t know why exactly that Curly T was coming, especially seeing as how Dad said he never came, but I wanted to get out of there even more than ever except that I just didn’t know how and couldn’t make up my mind which was worse: facing Curly T right there in the motel or having Dad out all over Cimarron looking for me with his .357 magnum and besides, who knew, maybe if I ran he’d bring Curly T with him to look for me which made going to jail or wherever the government might put me look like not such a bad option.

To make matters even worse, after about a week or so I started having a really hard time breathing and when I breathed heavy I sounded a lot like Henry’s grandma when she smoked and I started getting dizzy and my eyes itched all the time. My eyes were so dry that I was always rubbing them and eventually I started looking like a raccoon only instead of black circles around my eyes I had these wicked red circles from where I couldn’t stop rubbing. On top of all that the water had quit working and so all I had to drink were the sodas that Dad brought me back from the Whistle Stop which sometimes he forgot to do and I got pretty thirsty. Dad said they’d had problems with the septic system and they’d had to

shut the water off which made Dad pretty nervous for some reason and me pretty thirsty. So with Curly T on his way eventually and me not having any real food or water except for what Dad brought me from the Whistle Stop and my head feeling all weird and me still wearing a pair of pants I'd pissed in I was pretty much in the worst shape I'd been in a long time and I was starting to wish I'd of just stayed with Mom even if it wasn't in our house on Garden Street and we didn't have a VCR.

Sometime at the end of the first week – or maybe it was the second week – Dad shut himself up in the bathroom and I actually got the chance to look out the window for a while. It was getting to be dark and I'm pretty sure it was a Friday night on account of all the cars coming in from Stillwater to go to the casino which meant that there would be plenty of people staying in the motel that night despite the fact the septic tank was having problems which sort of made me happy because I felt less alone but at the same time meant that Dad would make me stay up all night and keep guard.

The longer I looked out at the headlights on 33, the more they started to bleed together like there was an ocean of headlights out there, drifting on top of Cimarron and the longer I stared the dizzier my head got. After a while the highway and all the lights turned into a river right in front of me. Not a normal river but like a river I'd seen on TV right after a big flood when I was a kid. The things was rushing really fast and all white and bubbly and it was tearing through Cimarron right in front of me and carrying all this stuff on top of it like the sign for the Hair Cottage where Mom worked when she was clean and the steeple from the Assembly of God Church and the glass doors from the Whistle Stop. And then I noticed Henry's trailer float by and I saw Henry sitting on top of it, waving at me, and not too far behind that Henry's grandma was floating on a piece of wood, holding her oxygen tank in

her lap and waving at me, too, and then I saw Mom hanging on to the front door of the First Baptist Church, waving at me, too. They were all floating away on the crests of the headlight river, waving goodbye or hello – I couldn't tell.

When I looked up at the sky it was overcast and there weren't any stars only clouds that just made the sky look gray and drab and it felt just then like everything in the universe was standing still except what was on that river, floating away forever, which just left me and that big, gray sky alone. My eyes started to itch and after I rubbed them and looked back out at the road the river was still there but the people were all gone. All I could see was what was floating by, but there was something different about it. I looked a little closer and I noticed that all the brush in the river wasn't brush at all but bones – jagged bones sticking out of the water – some of them looked like arm bones and some of them looked like ribs and then I saw a skull and then I saw an entire skeleton rushing down the river, waving at me.

The bathroom door opened and I heard it slam against the sink. When I turned around Dad was buckling his belt with one hand and taking a drag off his cigarette with the other.

“What are you doing there by the window, boy? Get away from there.”

When I turned around the river was gone, and all I could see were the headlights again and an armadillo they lit up at the edge of the parking lot, turned up on his back, his guts and insides all coming out of his side.

Chapter 9

That night it started to storm and Dad and I watched TV together which was pretty much the only thing we could do together that was tolerable and didn't make me a little scared. Dad turned on the news and Linda Cavanaugh was doing a report on a murder that had happened in Stillwater. A man and his wife had been murdered in their trailer south of town and their red Chevy pickup was stolen which meant that if anyone had seen a red Chevy truck they were supposed to call Linda Cavanaugh on her private hotline so that she could notify the police.

"It's the Goodwin brothers," I said.

"Yeah? What do you know about the Goodwin brothers?" Dad asked me.

"Just what I seen on TV."

"The TV don't account for the wickedness of those two men," he said.

I asked him what he meant and he just ignored me. He got bored with the news pretty quick – he couldn't watch any channel for longer than five minutes – and started pacing around the room, smoking his cigarette real fast and murmuring to himself. I looked at the

gun on the nightstand and started inching to the other side of the bed. He started jumping up and down in place.

“Let’s just change the channel,” he said. “Let’s just watch something different.”

Sometimes Dad would get real upset about things that seemed important like not having any water or the cops coming but sometimes he couldn’t tell the difference between the thought of him getting arrested or not knowing what to do on account of him being bored.

He flipped to the History Channel and there was a documentary on about ancient Egypt and all those mummies and buried treasure. A man that was pretty much dressed like Indiana Jones was going down into this dark tomb with a team of experts or something of the like to raid this tomb that was like a hundred feet below one of those giant pyramids. They were looking for the body of some king named Ramses or something, because apparently he had all this treasure from when he had a bunch of slaves working for him.

“This could be one of the most important discoveries in the history of archeology,” the man said.

When they got to the bottom of this room, though, there was no body which was pretty creepy on account of a lot of stuff still being in the room and there even being this big stand to put a body on but no body. The Indiana Jones man said grave robbers must have beaten them there some time in the last three thousand years.

“Maybe he just got up and walked out,” Dad said. “Isn’t that what mummies do? Go around haunting everyone?”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not but just in case he thought I was an idiot I shared my opinion on the matter with him, which turned out not really to be my opinion at all but Henry’s opinion.

“I don’t believe that mummies come back to life. I don’t believe in any of that.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I believe in hauntings. I’ve been haunted for years.”

I told him there were no such things as hauntings because real science didn’t allow for such things and he said that was ridiculous because by their very nature ghosts were excluded from the study of science which sort of made sense to me because if ghosts didn’t haunt scientists, then it makes sense that scientists wouldn’t believe in ghosts, and I thought about how I wanted to tell Henry and that’s when I realized how much I missed him already.

The storm was starting to get pretty bad so Dad turned it back to the news and Gary England was saying that Payne County needed to take cover but Dad said no because he had business to do down at the casino and none of the gamblers or the tweakers would be taking covers so why should he. Plus he said we didn’t have anywhere to take cover, which made me think of Mom and I wondered if she’d be okay. Dad said that nothing would probably happen anyway which was pretty much true – most people in Cimarron just went outside and watched the sky when the weatherman said to take cover.

Eventually the TV zapped and all the lights went out and I was pretty scared because if we didn’t have any TV or lights I was sure that Dad would turn on me if for nothing than out of boredom.

“You’ve been nothing but bad luck, you know that?” he told me. “First the water and now the lights.”

I heard a noise that sounded like gas and all of a sudden a small light lit up the room and I realized that Dad had turned on one of his burners for light even though it wasn’t very bright and only made the room kind of yellow and shadowy like when the electricity got shut off at our house on Garden Street towards the end and we had to use candles at night so that

we could see. I asked Dad if I could at least watch out the window for the tornado and he said no, it wasn't safe because if the tornado did come I'd be the first thing to go and besides we couldn't be drawing attention to our little operation.

"Now, I've got to get down to the casino to pick up some money from a friend. I've got to buy more pseudo. So I'm going to walk down to the casino, get the money, borrow a car and drive to the Wal-Mart in Stillwater. Do you think you can hold down the fort?"

I nodded my head.

"Good boy. And remember the rules. Don't be looking out that window for more than three seconds."

He grinned and pulled his cigarettes out of his pocket and shoved one in his mouth and threw the pack on the table by the window.

"Be good."

I was always scared when Dad was around but for some reason that night I kind of wished he was there on account of the tornado and there not being any lights or sound except the rain and the thunder and the sound of cars out on the street. The only light in the room was coming from the burner and bouncing off the mirror on the wall and I wondered how long one of those things could burn before it went out completely. On top of all of that my head was feeling worse than it had in however long I'd been there and when I moved too quickly the whole room kind of whooshed around me like my head was in a bucket and the room was the water inside.

I wandered around the room a bit to try to kill some time but when I remembered how small the room was and that there was nothing new to discover I sat down in the chair by the

window and leaned back at an angle so I could just see a bit between the curtains and that's when I realized that Dad had left his cigarettes lying on the table.

I guess I was bored more than anything, but I really wanted to know what all the fuss was about since pretty much everyone I'd ever known except Henry had smoked all the time. I put one in my mouth and used a book of matches that was sitting in the ashtray on the table that had never been used. I didn't really know how to smoke the thing so I just put it in my mouth and sucked as hard as I could. I couldn't feel the smoke or anything and I didn't cough like I expected to and I couldn't feel my lungs fill up but I did feel my head fill up. My scalp kind of tingled and for a moment I felt like I could concentrate for the first time in a long time – maybe ever – and my body just relaxed all of a sudden.

The feeling didn't last long, though, and it started to get mixed up with the lightheadedness I'd already been feeling and then I really needed to throw up but I hadn't been eating enough to have anything to throw up and so I just heaved. I heaved and heaved and couldn't breathe and with my head down between my knees I thought I might never come up for air again.

When I did the room was waving like a flag and that's when I saw the Deer Woman for the first time. She was sticking her head out of the bathroom, watching me, and I wouldn't even have seen her if it weren't for her eyes, which were real white and sort of lit up the room. I didn't know how anyone got in the room at first, but I knew for sure when she started making her way around the bed in front of the TV and I realized she didn't have feet at all but hooves.

She was young and she wasn't wearing anything and it was the first naked woman I'd ever seen except for a spread that David Deeter had brought to school one day that he'd torn

out of his dad's *Cheri* magazines, but it didn't matter because in person it was totally different and I suddenly got the urge to get up and cross the room and touch her. It was like she knew I had this thought, though, because she put out her hand and without her having to say anything I knew she wanted me to stay where I was. She walked over to the nightstand and picked the gun up and she rubbed it all over her body like it was a hundred degrees out and the gun was a piece of ice and I got this feeling down in the pit of my stomach and even lower that I'd never had before like a snake was starting to stir and crawl up inside of me. She was real beautiful except for the hooves which you didn't really notice anyway on account of her being naked and there being other things to look at besides her feet.

She crossed the room and stood right in front of me and I noticed I was starting to spin and the room was starting to feel like a bucket of water again when she sat down in my lap, her legs straddled on both sides of me and she took my hands in hers and put them around her waist and I swear to God I've never felt something that soft in my life. Her skin was dark and her hair was darker and it sort of fell all around my head and twisted and pulled me towards her and all I could think about was that snake twisting inside of me and I wanted her to know about it. Her breasts were right in my face and her dark nipples started to brush up against my face and it was all I could do to sit still especially when I remembered that she had Dad's gun in her hand and it was now behind my head where I couldn't see it. She took one of my hands off of her waist and put the gun in my hand.

"Kill him."

Her voice was soft and I could feel it hot on my ear.

"Just kill him."

"I don't think that would be very right," I told her.

“What do you know about right and wrong?”

She was pretty much right because Mom had never said much about what was right and wrong only what was smart and stupid and I actually had to think about it for a second.

“You’ve got a gun right there.” She smiled at me and I noticed for the first time that she didn’t have any teeth. “Just take it and kill him.” She straddled me and sat down in my lap and pushed her chest up in my face and smiled her toothless smile again and for some reason I couldn’t help but think about all those times when Mom made me sit out under that dead oak tree while she went inside with men.

When her face got really close she licked her gums and all of a sudden her face looked like it was a hundred years older – even older than Henry’s grandma – and I could see the shape of her skull behind her skin and her eyes started to turn black like Mom’s did when she was tweaking except this blackness was much deeper and started spreading everywhere in the room.

“No,” I told her and her smile went away.

“Kill him,” she said again, only her voice had changed into something wicked awful that sounded a lot like the screaming voices on the heavy metal music Dad listened to mixed with the sound of the gravel in front of Henry’s trailer when someone drove by.

“I’m not going to kill no one,” I told her again, even if she had turned into something way scarier than anything I’d ever seen on TV or in a movie. Her skull head got so close that our foreheads were touching and when she stuck her tongue out I noticed it wasn’t a tongue at all but the head of a snake which had it’s own tongue and I wouldn’t normally let someone kiss me with a snake tongue but for some reason I couldn’t move a muscle and half of me didn’t even want to. She stuck her tongue in my mouth and started to kiss me and I

could feel the snake wriggling around in my mouth and trying to make its way down inside of me and I wondered if that snake was going to find the snake that was already there and I wondered if they would fight.

“Kill him,” she said again, only this time I couldn’t tell where the voice was coming from on account of her tongue already being inside of my mouth.

I tried to say no or yell for help, but I couldn’t say a word because my mouth had that snake in it, which was huge and dry and made my mouth feel like it was filled with sand, besides the fact that if I yelled I knew Dad would kill me for sure. Her arms twisted around me and I noticed that they were turning into tree branches – dead ones like the tree outside of G39 at Cimarron Storage – and they were twisting and curling their way around my neck and shoulders. I started to get that feeling again like I had at the storage unit like I was becoming a part of those roots and they were pushing me down all the way to the center of the earth, where no matter how hard I tried, I could never escape. It was like me and the whole motel room became the trunk of this giant tree that was a thousand years old and the Deer Woman was hanging on the side with her snake tongue slithering down our trunk and into the center of the earth to find me. I couldn’t breathe.

“Kill him,” she said again. “Kill me.”

That’s when the door flew open and Dad came inside.

“We’re fucked,” he yelled. “Completely fucked.”

When I looked down at my lap the Deer Woman was gone and everything was back to normal and there wasn’t anything in my mouth. I looked around the room to see where she’d gone but couldn’t see anything. I could here a rattle, though, and when I looked for it I saw the tail end of a rattlesnake as it slithered under the bed right in front of me.

“What the fuck is the matter with you?” Dad said. “Didn’t you hear me? We’re fucked.”

I looked again and the rattlesnake was gone.

Dad was soaking wet from head to toe and he had that same crazy look in his eye that he had when he thought I’d poisoned his food but it was even scarier this time because I didn’t know why he was mad and I didn’t know whether the poison was real or not this time. When he slammed the door behind him the flame on the burner went out and it was just me and him in the dark and I wanted to tell him that the Deer Woman had been here but I didn’t think it was the best idea on account of him already being all messed up in the head and that’s when I noticed that the gun was sitting on the table next to me and not on the nightstand where he’d left it.

“The money’s all gone, Goose,” he told me.

“What money?” I asked him, trying real hard not to look at the gun so maybe he wouldn’t notice it.

“The goddamned money that they gave me to buy materials. Plus the money I’d saved up from the chicken feed. All of it. Gone.”

He was pacing up and down the room in front of the televisions and waving his hands around in the air.

“All that money you had saved up to buy those fighting cocks and that water park?”

He closed in on me with his eyes and arms and had me by the scruff of my shirt.

“What part of *all of it* don’t you understand, boy?”

Even though it was dark, I could tell his eyes were all black but for some reason he didn’t scare me as much as usual considering what I’d just seen which I still couldn’t believe

had even happened. Mom had been right sure enough but she hadn't been right about the fact that the Deer Woman wanted to kidnap me and that's when I realized that Dad coming in when he did had basically saved me from her and I knew that I couldn't let Dad leave my side again or she would get me for sure.

His face softened a little and he shoved me back in the chair. He picked the gun up off of the nightstand and starting waving it everywhere as he paced around the room, which normally would have scared me a bit more, but it didn't on account of him obviously not noticing that the gun had been moved.

“All of it, Goose. Almost six thousand dollars. Six thousand goddamned dollars.”

“Well where'd it all go?” I asked him.

“It's at the blackjack tables at the fucking casino, that's where it is. And they know. Oh they know. They have to. Curly T knows, so they *have* to know.”

“Who's *they*?” He stared at me but didn't say a word, just paced and looked around until his eyes fixed on the pack of cigarettes sitting next to me. He crossed the room and picked up the pack and stuffed one in his mouth and I thought about how I had smoked one and wondered if he'd be mad at me for smoking cigarettes on account of it probably not being the healthiest thing for a boy my age. He lit the cigarette with a match from the book sitting on the table and took in a long drag.

“I got to get that money back somehow, Goose. I got to get that money back or they'll kill me for sure. I got to get at least *some* of it back. I get *something*, I can cook more and maybe cut it worse than normal and jack up the prices and get some of that money back.”

“Why are they going to kill you?”

“Well, this ain't the first time this has happened, Goose.”

He kept on pacing, wearing a trail in the floor as he smoked. If Dad was dead, I was, too. I didn't know what was worse: staying here with Dad and getting killed or leaving him and having to face the Deer Woman again which was an option I hadn't even had time to consider in all its fullness in light of Dad's new predicament. Maybe she was right: maybe the only way out of it all was to kill Dad which probably wasn't even a real option on account of me knowing I could never kill someone no matter how scary the other option was. Plus, if I killed Dad, I'd definitely have the government out after me and there was no amount of brainwashing they could do that could wipe the thought of that woman's snake tongue wriggling it's way down my throat and into my stomach.

"I know where we can get some money," I said.

Dad's eyes lit up and for a second I could see the blue in his eyes.

"Really?"

"I know where we can get almost four hundred dollars," I told him, and I already felt rotten.

Chapter 10

Stealing from Henry was pretty much the last thing that I wanted to do in the world but it didn't seem like I had much of a choice on account of someone being out after Dad now and the Deer Woman being out there and all of the rest of the people in the galaxy that seemed to want a piece of me and besides, part of me couldn't just sit there and let someone kill Dad even if he wasn't the greatest dad in the history of the world. If anything, it was a chance to get outside of that motel room for a change.

I knew Henry's work schedule so I thought it would be a sure thing except for Henry's grandma but I knew she couldn't get out of bed anyway. Me and Dad squatted down by the banks of the Cimarron until we were sure that Henry had gotten in the van and the van had left the trailer park.

"Now you know for sure that this retard's got that kind of money just sitting around in his trailer?" Dad asked me.

"He keeps it in a box up in his closet," I told him. "I've seen it."

"And he gets all this money just from picking up change around town?"

“Sure does. Henry says that if people would take better care of their nickels and dimes that the world would be a richer place. Of course he wouldn’t have any money himself.”

“You mean *we* wouldn’t have any money *ourselves*?”

He laughed real loud which made me feel uneasy on account of it being the first time I’d thought of myself as a criminal and me not wanting anyone to hear us. The church van pulled up in front of Henry’s trailer and let out two short honks and Henry opened the front door and jumped down to the ground and I could see that his face was pretty much healed up which made me happy but that only made me feel even worse about what we were about to do. When the van was clear out of sight Dad climbed up the bank and then put his hand out to help me.

“You’re about to save my life, Goose,” he said.

The key was right where Henry left it in the hole in the side of the bottom cinder block that made up the stairs to the trailer door. I unlocked the front door and we both slid inside. Everything was just like I remembered it: the Precious Moments shrine and the couch where I’d laid around during the day and read my *Star Wars* books and the shut door at the other end of the kitchen where Henry’s grandma slept all day and smoked her Virginia Slims. The cabinet doors in the kitchen were all open like Henry always left them and the coffee table had about a dozen Mountain Dew cans on it. The place smelled like menthol and peanut butter which wasn’t the best smell in the world but smelled like perfume compared to Dad’s meth lab and my new home and each step I took closer to Henry’s room I started to feel worse and worse about what I was doing and all I could think about was how Henry was

probably standing up in his pew right then, singing some song in the hymnal, thanking Jesus for saving his soul. I stopped right before Henry's door.

"I don't want you coming in here," I told Dad.

He just slapped the back of my head and pushed on past me and opened the door himself and looked around the room with this sort of disgusting look that kind of reminded me of the way that Kirby looked at Henry. There still wasn't anything in the room except for the mattress on the floor and the sheets on the mattress and the one chair that sat next to the closet with all Henry's clothes draped over it.

"How can that retard live like this?" Dad said.

I ignored him and opened up the closet and pulled the chair inside the closet. Dad flopped down on Henry's bed, which made me cringe a little for some reason, and after he'd pulled out a cigarette and lit it up he put his hands behind his head real relaxed like.

"Why were you hanging out with such a weirdo, anyway?" he asked.

"He's not a weirdo," I said. "He just isn't that bright, that's all."

"He should be in a home or an asylum or wherever they put people like him – kept away from normal, decent people like me and you so that we can be safe," he told me. "You shouldn't be hanging out with a freak like him. You know, statistically speaking, he's more likely to kill you or molest you – even more than a priest." He laughed real hard and took a drag from his cigarette. "People like that can hurt you."

I reached up inside the hole in the ceiling of his closet and pulled down the box but it was so heavy that I fell backwards off the chair and landed on the floor with a pretty big thud and the box spilled over and a bunch of rolls of Henry's change went spilling out all over the bedroom. I expected Dad to be mad but he wasn't. I figured it was because he was just

happy to be seeing so much cash, which meant he could live. And me. The horrible feeling I had started turning into a sort of anger and I heard this voice in the back of my head.

“Kill him,” it said.

I kind of shuddered because as soon as I recognized who the voice belonged to all I could think about was that skull looking down at me with the snake coming out of the mouth and for some reason all of a sudden I wanted to throw up. I ran out of Henry’s room and through the living room and got to the kitchen sink just in enough time to pretty much puke my guts up all over the dishes that were piled up in the sink. It was kind of a dark red color and I felt dizzy for a second until the fresh air kind of caught up with me and that’s when I heard the breathing machine in the other room and realized that I needed to be quiet. Dad came out of the room with the box and laughed at me.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

I stayed bent over with my hands on my knees, breathing real heavy and ignoring him. He looked into the sink and frowned and then laughed.

“You got the hack, son. That’s a sign you’re a real warrior.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about but that horrible feeling came back and I couldn’t even look at him without feeling sick. He sat the box down on the table and starting looking through the cabinets.

“They ain’t got shit in this house,” he said.

He threw his cigarette down on the floor and stomped it out with his foot and sat down at the table and pulled a plastic bag out of his back pocket that had his needle and crank in it. For some reason the thought of Dad shooting up right there in Henry’s kitchen made me madder than I’d ever been in the world despite the fact that I was there myself to

steal Henry's money and I started to burn pretty bad when he took his belt off and started to wrap it around his arm.

"Can't you do that when we get home?" I asked him.

He let the tension out of the belt and turned in his seat and looked at me.

"Now what's your problem?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just think maybe we should get out of here before someone catches us and besides, Henry's grandma might figure out that we're here if she hasn't already and she might come out or call the cops or something."

I knew that Henry's grandma couldn't get up even if she wanted to, and I knew that the phone was in the living room, but I couldn't quite bring myself to tell Dad that I didn't want him doing it on account of it feeling wrong since Dad didn't particularly like to be told that the things he did weren't always the best. He just grinned with the belt in between his teeth and I could see in the light just how black his teeth really were but I still couldn't handle it so I reached out and picked the needle up just before he tried to do the same. His grin went away and he let go of the belt.

"Now you listen here," he said. "We ain't playing games. Now you give me that goddamned needle before I take this belt and send you back to Saturday."

I started to back away and sure enough he pulled his belt off of his arm and all I could think about was that night that Kirby did a number on Henry for not having his check from the government and before I knew it I felt the coffee table creep up behind me and then I felt it on the backside of my head and I heard all of those Mountain Dew cans rolling across the living room floor. The needle fell out of my hand and rolled right alongside them and Dad reached down and picked it up and the grin came back to his face but it was gone real quick

and I couldn't keep my eyes off the belt in his hand. He reached down and pulled me up by my shirt and looked down at me and just stared and didn't say nothing for the longest time and I didn't say anything on account of the belt still being wrapped up in his hand and on top of that he was still holding the needle and I've never been a fan of needles. When the staring and silence was almost unbearable he threw me down on the floor by the door and kicked one of the cans at me.

"Go wait the fuck outside," he said.

I went outside and sat down on the steps with my elbows on my knees and wondered how long it was going to take before we could get out of Piney River Mobile Homes and I could start to forget about Henry forever and I wondered if you could still see the "G" I carved in the base of that oak tree at the beginning of the summer but decided there was no use in looking for it because I knew for sure that I wouldn't ever be back. I just sat there, thinking about how Dad was shooting up inside, and watched Moses run in circles. She was running in circles and letting out this kind of high-pitched whine that I'd heard her do a hundred times and she kept stopping to look at me and tilt her head like she knew I had something to say and he wanted to hear it.

"What do you want?" I asked her.

She just looked at me and tilted her head.

For some reason I couldn't stand the sight of her just sitting there, looking at me so I picked up the Mountain Dew can that Dad had kicked out the door with me and I threw it at her as hard as I could and can you believe it I landed it right on her head and she let out this little yelp but I knew it couldn't hurt that bad because the can was empty. She sniffed at the can when it was on the ground and nuzzled it a little and all of a sudden all I could think

about was Lando Calrissian and how he'd turned his back on Han Solo even though they were old friends and Han needed Lando more than anything. I guess he had to, in the end, because Darth Vader was breathing down his neck and besides, he had a good thing going at the Bespin Mining Facility.

"You're alright," I told Moses.

She kept whining though and I felt real terrible about what I'd done and so I got up off the cinder blocks and walked over towards her and as soon as I started moving her direction she stuck her back half up in the air and started wagging her tail real furiously and whimpering and looking at me. When I got closer to her, though, and stuck my hand out to pet her she jumped as high as I'd ever seen a dog jump and would've landed right on top of me if the chain hadn't pulled taught and yanked her back on the ground and she started barking and snarling at me and bearing her teeth and I wished I had another can to throw at her despite the fact that I didn't have much energy to throw a can anymore, anyhow. I didn't have much energy to do anything. All I could do was worry: worry about the Deer Woman and worry about Dad and worry about the money I'd stolen from Henry and worry about the government. There wasn't enough energy for anything else, but I had to go on – energy or not. I was standing there, thinking about all of that, with Moses barking her head off two inches from my face when I heard a crash inside of Henry's trailer.

When I got inside the door I saw Dad lying on the floor in the kitchen with Henry's grandma's Precious Moments scattered all over the place. Dad was just laughing as hard as he could and holding the head from one of the figures in his hand.

"Ain't so precious now, are they?"

He laughed and kicked his feet and when he did a few more of the figures crunched underneath him.

“What did you do?” I asked him.

“Now don’t you get all serious on me, boy,” he told me. “I just got a little too excited.”

He tried to stand up but half-way up he slipped again and I could hear more of the figurines break and the shelves they were on twisted and broke and all I could think about was how Henry’s grandma was just sitting in there in the next room, listening to all of her Precious Moments get shattered and her not able to do anything about it.

“Come on,” I said. “We got to get out of here.”

I helped him get to his feet and as I pulled on his arm I could see that his eyes were almost completely black. He just put his hand on top of my head and messed my hair and told me I was a good son. I would’ve picked up the box of change but I couldn’t bear the idea of me stealing the stuff myself regardless of whether it was my idea or not and besides, the thing was too heavy for me to carry anyway. Dad picked it up and we were out the door as fast as we could go. I wanted to run but the box was too heavy for Dad to run with on top of the fact that he was about as spun out as I’d ever seen him and he couldn’t stop rambling about how happy he was and how I’d really come through for him and he was going to make it up to me somehow, he promised.

When we got back to the motel, Dad dropped the box on top of the bed and sat on top of it and threw his head back and sort of started to bark and howl like he was a coyote yipping at the moon and he was so happy that I was sort of excited myself except for the fact

that I pretty much felt like I was the most low-down scoundrel the world had ever known which I knew wasn't completely true but true enough. Dad jumped down from on top of the box and grabbed my face and kissed me right on the lips.

“Fuck, Goose, you're a goddamned hero.”

He laughed and danced around the room.

“So you're going to buy the stuff to make some more crank, aren't you? And we're not going to get killed?”

“You bet your ass.”

He opened up the top of the box and pulled out a couple of rolls of change and put them in his pocket.

“I'll go to Wal-Mart tonight.”

“Where are you going?” I asked him.

“To buy some things,” he told me. “I need some cigarettes and some food. Don't you want some food?”

He didn't give me time to answer.

“I'll go to Stillwater first thing when I get back and we'll get down to cooking.” He jumped up in the air and tried to kick his heels together but he missed and fell over on the side of the bed but he wasn't mad, he just laughed and clapped his hands. “Cooking! Me and you! I'll show you how the whole process works, start to finish. You want to learn how to cook up a little chicken feed?”

I didn't answer. He picked the box up and set it on the floor next to the door and then covered it up with a couple of the towels that he found wadded up next to the trashcan.

“I’ll be back before you can say Henry Quarters! Now you keep an eye out on the place.”

He didn’t come back all day or night which I didn’t mind at all because I needed some peace and quiet to get some sleep but all I could think about was the Deer Woman coming back out as soon as she had a chance. The electricity was back on and I was feeling a little better and so I wasn’t quite as scared but you can’t see something like that and not be scared forever, no matter how much I promised myself that I wouldn’t be afraid again when I left Mom for good.

I don’t know how long I’d been asleep when someone knocking on the window woke me up. I knew it had been quite some time on account of it being light again but I didn’t know *how* long as I hadn’t slept in quite some time. Then I heard a voice with the knocking and I immediately knew it was Henry.

“Goose! Goose!” he said.

I jumped out of the bed and was at the window with the curtain back in no time.

“Here I am! Henry?”

“I am!”

I didn’t know how he knew I was in the room and I momentarily forgot that I was squatting next to Henry’s box of change but for a moment I felt like the luckiest person in the galaxy.

“I need your help, Goose,” Henry said.

“What for?”

“Grandma’s dead. I don’t know what to do. Grandma’s dead and they’re going to stick me with Kirby. They’re going to stick me with Kirby and that will be the end of me for sure.”

“They’re going to put you with Kirby? When?”

“I don’t know. No one knows she’s dead yet. I didn’t tell no one. I just came to find you.”

I wanted to tell Henry everything but before I even had the chance he just up and disappeared and that’s when I saw Dad come around the corner and I realized that Henry was scared. I didn’t know what to do on account of my only real friend needing help but me not being able to for fear that Dad wouldn’t let me go and besides, I’d helped Dad steal all Henry’s money. I heard the key rattling and Dad threw the door open and came in with what looked like a sack of groceries and a cup from the Whistle Stop.

“That retard’s out there running around like a chicken with its goddamned head cut off,” he said. He dropped the bag down on the table by the door and started waving his arms like chicken wings and bending his knees real funny and bobbing his head and making chicken noises. “Has no idea that we’re sitting on his family fortune.” He laughed and started in on his chicken impersonation again, which was pretty bad and didn’t make any sense since a chicken with his head cut off doesn’t cluck.

“Did you get me something to eat?” I asked.

Dad kept clucking but extended one of his wings to turn over the paper sack and can you believe it a whole mountain of food poured out: Twinkies and Cheetoos and those little donuts all covered in wax and before I even had a chance to thank him I had one of the Twinkie packages ripped open and half the thing crammed down my throat. I didn’t know

when the last time I'd eaten was on top of the fact that Twinkies are basically one of my favorite foods, plus you have to factor in that I didn't know when the next time Dad would bring something home was. Dad handed me the Styrofoam cup.

"Now don't you choke on that Twinkie, son," he said. "There's some Mountain Dew for you. You got to keep yourself hydrated and full of nutrients. I don't always want to eat myself, but I have to remind myself that feeding the body is important."

I sucked on the straw as hard as I could but as soon as the soda hit my tongue all I could think about was the Mountain Dew cans that Henry saved up for God knows what reason and the fact that we still had his money and that Henry's grandma was dead and Henry was out there somewhere, running around, scared to death, needing my help. Dad pulled his belt off and sat down on the bed.

"You need to get ready, Goose," he told me, "cause after this ride I'm gonna have to crash. Been over two weeks. We'll have to shut out the lights, lock the door, and get some sleep for a few days. That's why I stocked up on so much grub. Keep us going. I just got to get one more shot of the shit in me, take that money to the casino and swap it out for real bills, and go to Stillwater to get the shit for a new batch. After I sleep a few days we'll get to cooking."

He pulled back on the end of the syringe, which was needle first into the spoon sitting on the counter. I'd seen Mom crash before and it just wasn't something I wanted to see again, especially with all of the stuff that was on my mind and Henry maybe having to go live with Kirby. He pulled his belt tight with his teeth and started looking around on his arm for somewhere to stick the needle. I hated watching Dad do it on account of me not liking needles to begin with and it seeming like a thing that a doctor or a nurse should do, which

wasn't entirely true, I knew, because I'd seen David Deeter's mom give him a shot because he was a diabetic and she wasn't a nurse. Still, I didn't like seeing it.

"Fuck it," he said. He pulled the belt off of his arm and twisted it around his other arm. "No room left on the boat."

He finally found a place to stick the thing, which I didn't understand on account of there being plenty of veins in the human body to begin with, and when he did he let out a pretty nasty moan and fell flat backwards on the bed with the needle still in his arm. I didn't know what to do at first, not having ever seen him do this before, but pretty soon his head popped up and he sat up and started twitching real bad and sort of moaning and whimpering at the same time. He pulled the needle out of his arm and threw it on the floor. When he turned around his eyes were blacker than I'd ever seen them and his entire face was drenched in sweat and he had this look on his face like he was sort of angry but didn't quite know what was going on.

"Get me that Mountain Dew," he said.

I picked up the cup and crawled across the bed to hand it to him and when he took the cup out of my hand he grabbed my arm with his free hand and looked at me but didn't say anything. I could feel his hand trembling mighty awful and when I tried to pull it away he just squeezed harder and kept staring right on through me with those black eyes and I started worrying that maybe he'd gone crazy for good and was finally going to kill me even though I'd pretty much just saved his life. He didn't even take a drink – he just dropped the thing on the floor and I could see the Mountain Dew spill all over the floor and the color made me think about the time that I'd pissed my pants in the next bed and then I realized that that was the rest of what I had to drink while he crashed. He finally spoke up.

“My goddamned heart.”

He let go of my hand and I backed away as fast as I could and sat back down where I'd been sitting when the Deer Woman came after me.

“My goddamned heart,” he said. “And this goddamned itch. It won't go away, Goose. This goddamned itch won't go away.”

He started scratching his arm and he scratched so hard and fast that eventually he started to bleed and I couldn't tell if it was coming out of where he scratched or all the scabs he had on his arm from where he stuck the needle.

“The goddamned itch!”

He was kind of screaming and crying at the same time and by then he was standing up and I checked to see where he'd put the gun but I couldn't find it anywhere in the room and that's when I remembered he'd put it in the drawer of the nightstand when we got home from Henry's and I hoped he didn't remember it was there.

“It's these bugs,” he screamed.

He was still itching himself and the blood was starting to run down his arm and drip off the tips of his fingers and when he started to wave his arms around the blood started splattering on stuff.

“Make them stop, Goose! Get rid of these goddamned bugs!”

He must've been crazy or something because I didn't see any bugs anywhere but he was waving his hands all around him real violent like he was being attacked by a hive of killer bees or locusts or something and he just kept screaming as he backed into the corner by the TV. On his way there he knocked over all of the glass jars on the cabinet where his lab was and one of them shattered and when that happened he screamed real loud and sat down

on the floor and kept swatting at the bugs in the air. What was left of the chemicals in the bottles spilt all over the floor and when a couple of them mixed together they let out this hissing sound and what looked like smoke but cold started floating up to the ceiling and even though I'd gotten used to the smell in the place it hit me real hard again and I got kind of light headed and suddenly wanted to get out of there again.

“Get these bugs away from me,” he screamed again.

At that point in my life, I'd seen some pretty messed up stuff but nothing as scary as what Dad was doing right then which was clutching at his chest with one hand and jabbing at something invisible in the air with the other and looking at me with his dead black eyes and screaming.

“You!” He screamed at me like it was the first time he'd noticed me in the room. “You! This is your fault.” He kicked his legs everywhere and swatted at the bugs. “You brought this pestilence! Every since you been here, you've been nothing but bad luck.”

I didn't know what he was talking about on account of me just basically saving his life but I was pretty sure that if he got to that gun before I could get out of there that I was dead, which didn't turn out to be much of a problem: he wanted me out of there as much as I did.

“Get out,” he screamed. “Get the fuck out of here!”

I was out of there as fast as I've ever gotten myself out of a situation before – so fast, in fact, that I didn't even shut the door on the way out and when I got outside I saw Henry round the corner by the office and I realized that I still might be able to redeem myself, at least in part. I ran back inside and grabbed the box by the door and even though it was too heavy for me to pick up I drug it across the doorway and onto the sidewalk.

“Henry,” I said, “Come and get this.”

He was right there when I called and it was almost like he’d been waiting on me that whole time and I couldn’t help but think about how Princess Leah had sensed Luke’s presence while he was hanging from the very bottom of Cloud City and so he was rescued by everyone on the Millennium Falcon, even though Henry didn’t even have a car let alone a spaceship and probably didn’t even have any intuition on account of him being a retard. I told him I was sorry and that I’d explain later and he picked the box up and hoisted it up on his shoulder and that’s when Dad came right outside in the parking lot and started yelling at us.

“Wait,” he said. “I’m sorry.” He stumbled forward and was still scratching the bloody arm he was waving around. “You aren’t bad luck.”

Me and Henry looked at each other and that’s when we started to run.

“You get your fucking ass back here right now,” he screamed.

When he stepped off the sidewalk he fell down on the ground and I watched him twitching and screaming and kicking as we ran away and part of me wanted to go back and help him but the other half of me knew that would be the end of me for sure.

Chapter 11

Me and Henry were out on 33 and to the Whistle Stop in no time, despite the fact that Henry was lugging around a box that weighed more than I did and I hadn't had a breath of fresh air in over two weeks. The parking lot was pretty much empty but I was still nervous because we were standing right out in the open, so I grabbed Henry by the hand and pulled him around the side of the building where I was pretty sure we'd be safe. It was just a small strip of parking spots on the opposite side of the building than 33. We were closed in by a picket fence and there was nothing back there but propane tanks and a stack of sodas and the dumpster, which smelled like something dead. Henry dropped the box of change in front of the dumpster and sat on it and I bent down with my hands on my knees breathing as hard as I could.

"Henry," I said between these deep, scratchy breaths, "I'm sorry about all your coins and stuff. I mean I can explain but –"

"Don't say a word, Goose. I know you didn't have no choice – no choice. That man must've taken them, I'm sure. You're too nice a person to bust up all of Grandma's Precious Moments. Who was that man, anyway?" I told him it was my dad and I was a little

embarrassed when the words came out of my mouth. “You mean like the dad you were looking for when I met you?”

“Yeah, but listen, Henry. That’s not important. I’m really sorry about the money.”

“I don’t want – don’t want to hear it,” he said. “Forgive and forget. That’s what the Lord does, anyway. Besides, I know you didn’t have anything to do with it yourself.”

I don’t know why, but him forgiving me and telling me that he knew I would never do anything like that made me feel about a thousand times worse than the actual crime itself, and I wanted to tell him the truth but I didn’t say anything on account of me needing to get out of there as fast as I could and Henry being the only person on the face of the planet that would help me anymore.

“Alright,” I said. “We’ll just forget it. So your grandma is really dead?”

“Yeah, I found her lying on her bedroom floor – bedroom floor, like she was trying to get to the door. And the whole place was busted up and after I saw Grandma was dead one of the first things I did was check for my coins and I saw they were gone. At first I thought it was Kirby.”

“Kirby?” I didn’t like the idea of something I did being comparable to something that guy would’ve done.

“I saw you peeking out the window,” he said. “That’s how I knew where you were.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“I was scared of that man – your dad. I’ve seen him coming in and out of there and didn’t want anything to do with him. Plus, I thought maybe you’d see me and tell me what to do – what to do.”

“Hell no,” I said. “He wouldn’t let me stare out the window for longer than three seconds. He’s cooking meth in there.”

“You can cook meth?”

“Of course.”

I felt awful bad for Henry on account of me sort of knowing what it feels like to lose the only person that cares about you. Except when I thought I’d lost my only friend it was because I cheated him and not because he died. I was sure glad then that I’d gotten his money back for him, despite the fact that I still felt like about the most miserable creature in the galaxy, especially now that I was sort of a murderer, too. After we’d done our best to fill each other in on the bare essentials of what had happened over the past couple of weeks he started to cry a little bit and I wasn’t sure what to do. He just sat there on that box, in front of that blue dumpster, sobbing and hollering, and I didn’t know whether I should hug him or give him a pat or just ignore him and leave him with his dignity but before I could make up my mind he’d grabbed me and started squeezing me real hard and letting out these pretty deep sobs that made me know for sure he missed his grandma.

“What am I going to do, Goose? They’ll put me with Kirby and that’ll be the end of me. I don’t know what he’ll do with me. What am I going to do? I don’t even know who I’d tell if I told anyone.”

I pushed myself away from him.

“You’re not telling anyone,” I said. “If you tell anyone they’re just going to have some service for your grandma and then the government’s going to take you away or Kirby’s going to take you and suck the money out of you and beat you up with his belt all of the time.

And besides, even if they don't brainwash you or give you over to Kirby they're going to do something with you, and then what am *I* going to do?"

It felt like a selfish thing to say but it seemed to cheer Henry up a bit and got him to quit hollering and crying and he finally wiped his eyes and the little bit of snot that was hanging from his nose with his shirt sleeve.

"Then what are we going to do? She's just lying there on the floor, dead, and she's going to start to stink."

I thought about it for a minute and thought about how I had to be a sort of grown up if I wanted to control me and Henry's destiny and thought a bit about what Han Solo would do because he can almost get himself out of any pinch in the universe and I thought about the Deer Woman and that feeling I got about getting pushed down to the center of the earth and I decided that if we were going to get out of the situation we had to do it ourselves.

"We'll just have to bury the body," I told him.

Just then I felt a hand come down on my shoulder and in the flash of a second, I remembered that Dad had changed his mind about me leaving and that he still needed someone to watch over the lab and that I'd stolen back the money and plus he might still love me a little and I realized he could come any time and I knew it was him for sure.

"Now why would you two be burying a body?"

When I turned around and looked up it wasn't Dad at all but this tall, skinny guy with red hair just like mine – even taller than Henry. He had a black t-shirt tucked into his blue jeans and a giant belt buckle with a pair of longhorns on it. He was holding a briefcase and had a big smile, and I slowly backed up until I was sitting in Henry's lap. He leaned up against the propane cage and put his briefcase on the ground.

“You don’t got to be afraid, kid. Whatever bodies you got to bury are your business and all that. Name’s Anthony Lightfoot.” He stuck out his giant hand, which creeped me out because his fingers were all long and boney and had freckles all over them. I didn’t shake it. “We can shake later, I guess,” he said. “I’d like you to meet my – uh – business partner, Mr. Otis Weatherford.”

A boy not much older than me stepped out from around the propane cage. He was sort of fat and had some hair growing in on his upper lip and he was wearing a pair of British Knights that looked like they were about five sizes too big for him. He wouldn’t look us in the eyes. I didn’t know what they wanted, but I was pretty sure at any moment one of them was going to pull out a knife or a gun and force me and Henry into a car and they were going to hold us up somewhere, anywhere. For all I knew, they were the Goodwin brothers, and one of them was a dwarf or something.

“Don’t be afraid, kid,” the big redhead said. “We’re simply traveling businessmen of sorts. Making our way up through Oklahoma into Kansas. God’s country.” Henry picked me up off his lap and set me down and stood up and stuck out his hand.

“Nice to meet you,” Henry said. “My name’s Henry – Henry. My grandma just died.” The big redhead shook his hand and when the fat kid wouldn’t, the redhead slapped him on the back of the head and the kid stuck out his hand.

“And what’s your name?” the tall guy asked me.

“Goose.”

“Goose?”

“Goose. Who’s this kid, anyway? Is he your son or something?” The kid made me nervous on account of him acting all weird and following around a grown-up with a

briefcase. On top of that it was the first kid close to my age that I'd been around in what felt like forever.

"I ain't his son," the fat kid said. "He told you. My name is Otis. I'm his business partner." We eyed each other for a while and I decided maybe I'd let him be for the moment.

"What can we do for you?" Henry asked. I didn't know why Henry was being so nice – after all, Dad could've been anywhere and there was a dead grandma waiting to be buried at the trailer.

"Well, uh, we're selling some things," Anthony said, and he sat his briefcase down on the ground and popped it open. The kid just sort of hovered behind him and gave me the evil eye while I tried my best to be polite while trying to get Henry out of there. The case was filled with CD's and cassette tapes and some watches that looked like they'd been used and some plastic bags, one of which I noticed right away had meth in it and I wondered where he got it and it occurred to me that maybe these guys worked for Dad. "We've got all the latest hits on cassette tape and compact disc, we've got some grass, we've got some crystal, we've got some jewelry and other sorts of accessories." He pulled a gold watch out of the briefcase and held it up to Henry's arm. "Might look pretty good on you," he said. "This is normally a pretty expensive item, but in light of your kin being dead and everything, I'd be happy to sell it to you for ten dollars."

"We don't have time for this, mister," I said.

"It's a good watch," the kid said. I turned around to give Henry a look that said "let's get out of here" but he was gone and for a second my whole body sort of started trembling and I wondered if it had all been some sort of set up, like Dad had been testing me or something and at any moment he was going to swoop in and take me back to the motel, but

then I saw Henry bent down between the propane tanks and the stack of sodas and he came up and held out his hand which had two pennies and a nickel in it.

“Twelve cents,” Henry said.

“Good stuff,” Anthony said.

“We appreciate the offer, mister,” I said. “But we’ve really got to get going. You’ve got some nice things and all that, but we’ve got some things we’ve got to tend to back at the trailer park.”

When I said this, Henry picked up his box and rested it on his shoulder like he’d been waiting on me to say something the whole time even though he was the one that was so interested in talking to Indians and looking at watches.

“Oh yeah,” Anthony said. “You got a body to bury.”

I shuddered a little on account of me forgetting that he’d overheard our conversation and that Henry’s grandma was dead to begin with and I started to worry that maybe these two would rat us out and our whole plan would be shot and me and Henry would both end up somewhere deep within the government’s headquarters with tubes running in and out of us, filling us with new identities and erasing our memories.

“You know, I’m a Shaman,” Anthony said. “And little Otis here can help with the burial. We can help you get it done in half the time and I can do a proper ceremony.”

I wasn’t sure what his angle was and I didn’t trust the fat kid, but I also didn’t want them running off and blabbing about the body before it was buried, so I told them they could come along. When we left the Whistle Stop, I noticed Otis look both ways like he was about to cross traffic or something and when he saw that no one was looking he pulled a twelve-pack of Sunkist off the stack walked away like nothing had happened.

Chapter 12

The gravel road that led to the trailer park was all washed out from the big storm and it was like this big, wide trail of red Cimarron mud was leading us home and for a moment Dad and Curly T and Kirby and the government and even the Deer Woman were all swallowed up in a sea of madness behind us. It was so humid that we couldn't stop sweating but everything looked real green the way it does when tree trunks get wet and look black and make all the leaves look so green and brilliant that it hurts your eyes to stare too long. A hawk circled up above and we could see its shadow in the red mud at our feet.

“So you're a real live Indian Shaman?” I asked Anthony. I hadn't ever seen a white Indian with red hair before. “What exactly does that mean, anyways?”

“That means I live in the spirit world and the natural world at the same time.”

Henry laughed so hard he snorted.

“What's so funny about that?” Anthony asked.

“How can you live in more than one place at once?” he asked. “I mean, it doesn't make a lot of sense if you think about it.”

Anthony ignored him. “So why are we burying this old cooch, anyway?”

Henry dropped his box down on the ground and mud splattered all over our ankles and he grabbed Anthony by the scruff of his shirt in the same way that Dad used to grab mine when he wanted my attention and he got up real close to Anthony's face.

"That's my grandma we're talking about. Not some old cooch."

"What's a cooch?" I asked. No one answered. You could tell Anthony was real nervous cause he put his hands up in the air like people do in movies when they got a gun pointed at them and really calmly told Henry he didn't mean anything by it and Henry let him go. That's when I noticed Otis rooting around in Henry's box.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" I yelled at him, since it was pretty much my job not to let the box get stolen again on account of me being the one to steal it in the first place. I slapped his hands and folded the flaps back down and sat on the box.

"Why you got so many rolls of coins with you?" Otis asked.

"I think it's time you two got going on your own way," Henry said. Otis put his hands up like Anthony and they both stood there like we were going to shoot them even though we weren't killers and didn't even have a gun. I sort of started getting nervous then because we were standing right out in the open with the sun beating down on us for anyone on the highway to see, not to mention the fact that Otis and Anthony had their hands up like there was a hold up.

"Listen Henry," I said, "let's bring them along. Besides, he lives in the spirit world. We got to have someone to do the funeral right, don't we?"

"Alright," Henry said. But he didn't look any more relaxed or easy. He just picked the box back up and set it on his shoulder even though there was mud all over it. It's not like it mattered anyway. We had a body to bury and no one to see.

To our relief it was starting to get dark outside which was a good thing because we had to move around without any of the neighbors seeing us. I was a little worried about Moses throwing a fit but this time when I walked by she just wagged her tail and put her ears back and whined a little bit like she was glad to see us. Henry patted her on the head before he fished his key out of the cinderblock and let us into the trailer.

Everything was all cleaned up inside and wasn't a total mess like Dad and I had left it. There was a big, black trash bag sitting next to Henry's grandma's door and when I picked it up to see what it was, I heard a sort of clanking noise and realized that all of those broken figurines were inside and all of a sudden I felt real rotten on account of the memories that came flooding in of Dad trying to shoot up inside and I wondered again if we had anything to do with the old lady dying even though I was pretty sure I did.

Anthony and Otis sat down on the couch and propped their muddy feet up on the coffee table and I sat down on top of Henry's box of change.

"So why are we burying your grandma?" Anthony asked Henry. Henry didn't say anything. He just stood propped up in his grandma's doorway.

"Because if they find out she's dead," I said. "They're going to put Henry with his brother, who beats the crap out of him."

"Shut up," Henry said. "It isn't any of their business."

I wondered if Henry was just embarrassed because of the fact that Kirby beat him up and then I realized that maybe it was just embarrassing in general to have to live with someone all the time.

"We know it isn't any of our business," Anthony said. "We just don't want to helping out a couple of criminals."

“And why would we be criminals?” I asked. I wondered if he knew that I was basically responsible for the old lady’s death.

“Cause you killed the old lady,” Otis said. Henry turned around and went into his grandma’s room and slammed the door behind him and I felt bad about the whole murder accusation and so I got off the box and went in after him.

Grandma was face down on the floor with one of her arms stretched out towards the door and her oxygen mask was still on and for some reason that’s when I knew for sure that me and Dad had killed her. Henry was sitting on the floor next to her, crying. He had his knees tucked up under his chin and he was rocking back and forth like he was a little crazy.

“I didn’t ever think this would happen,” he said between sobs.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “She was an old lady. You had to sort of see it coming eventually.

“Uh-uh,” he said. “Once my parents died I sort of assumed that Grandma would live a long time, you know? I mean, the Lord only gives you so many people to take care of you. I just sort of thought that since my parents got taken so early that Grandma would last longer.”

I really didn’t know what he was talking about when he said that the Lord only gave us so many people to take care of us because I’d never give much thought to the Lord being a giver on top of the fact that if he was that he never really gave me anyone to take care of but Mom and she only did that when she was off the meth.

“Well I’m here, aren’t I?” I said and I immediately regretted it. I didn’t know what it took to take care of Henry and I was pretty sure that I wasn’t capable of doing it. I couldn’t even take care of myself without getting caught up in crazy situations. But that’s when

Henry grabbed me again like he did outside of the gas station and squeezed me real hard. I already knew that he was strong because I saw him carry that box around but I knew it then for sure because he squeezed so hard that it started to hurt and I had to holler for him to let me go. Anthony came to the door.

“Everything alright in here?”

Henry let up on me.

“Everything’s fine,” I said.

Anthony started talking about how they were going to go about burying the body and all I could do was stare at the old lady and wonder how I’d gotten where I’d gotten. I reached out and poked her elbow and couldn’t believe how cold she felt and how hard she was like all her veins had filled up with cement. I decided right then that I had to live by a new set of rules: no stealing and no killing and no helping cook drugs. Stuff that Mom warned me about but that I never knew what it would be like until it happened. I knew that if I was going to make it out alive I had to have these sorts of rules. I didn’t care what happened after that point: those were the rules and you could write them in stone.

“I want to bury her down there on the banks of the Cimarron,” Henry said. “I think that’s what she would have wanted.”

“It’s a bad idea to bury a body in sand,” Anthony said. “A real bad idea. You’d have to be a retard not to understand that.”

“And what do you know about burying bodies?” Henry asked. “You buried a lot of bodies in your time?” Anthony put his hands up again like he did in the road and his face sort of relaxed like he wanted to be Henry’s friend.

“Alright man, whatever you say. We’ll bury the thing in the sand. Next to the running water. She’d want it that way.”

There was only one shovel so Henry and I had to take turns digging the grave. We picked an open spot about the size of a body amongst the blackjack oaks that made their way down to the water. The first time Henry put the shovel in the ground and tossed the sandy clay to the side some water filled up the hole.

“Doesn’t matter,” Henry said. “It’s going to fill up anyway.”

Henry took his shirt off and did most of the digging himself.

“So why do you want Anthony to help us so bad?” he asked me.

“Well, you know. He’s like a priest or a shaman or whatever he is and he can do a proper burial. She’d want a proper burial, don’t you think?” Dirt and sand kept flying over his shoulder and landing in a pile behind him. The further he dug the deeper the pool of water got. “We got to have a proper burial or she’ll probably haunt us.”

“There’s not no such thing as ghosts, Goose. That’s not real science.”

“So you’re saying that you don’t believe in ghosts or apparitions or any such thing?”

“Nope. Just lost people looking for something more.”

“Well what if I told you that I seen a ghost just a few days ago?” I asked him. He put down the shovel.

“What do you mean? You seen a ghost?”

“When I was staying with Dad a woman came to me. A woman with hooves for feet that turned into a rattle snake.”

“What’d she do to you?”

I thought about telling him about how she kissed me and sort of became a part of me but I decided against it on account of Henry probably thinking that was lustful and unchristian and besides it was just plain gross anyway.

“She didn’t do nothing,” I said. “Just told me that I should kill my dad.”

“You aren’t just playing with me?”

“No.”

“Then you’re in trouble, Goose. That wasn’t any kind of ghost. Ghosts aren’t real. That must have been some sort of devil or demon.”

“Well what’s the difference between a ghost and a demon?” I asked.

“Real science has proven that ghosts aren’t real. Neither’s the Loch Ness Monster or stuff like that. But spiritual things like angels and demons are excluded from scientific research. If you seen a demon you better be careful, Goose. I haven’t ever met someone that’s seen a demon. Most folks don’t even believe in them anymore. That means the Devil must really have it out for you.”

I didn’t know why the Devil would have it out for me and I wasn’t entirely sure that I believed what Henry was saying on account of him being a little overly religious sometimes, but the Deer Woman didn’t make much sense to me to begin with, so I sort of stored it away as a possibility.

“Just don’t let one touch you,” he said. “Because once they’re inside of you they can do a lot of damage.” He jammed the shovel in the ground and wiped the sweat off his forehead. “We better make sure that she gets a good Christian burial.”

“And who’s going to do that?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t Anthony some sort of priest?”

“Yeah,” I said. “An Indian priest. What tribe did he say he was?”

“Apache.”

Henry kept digging into the bank but eventually the water got up as high as his knees and some of the dirt around the edges just sort of slid right back down into the hole. I knew I was supposed to be helping and wasn't so I went back to the trailer to see if Anthony could perform a real Christian service.

When I got back to the trailer, Anthony and Otis were sitting at the table with the briefcase open and Anthony was rolling one up out of that bag of grass they had.

“How's the digging going?” he asked.

“Alright, I guess. Hole sort of keeps filling back in, though,” I told him.

“I tried to warn him,” Anthony said. He licked the end of the paper and rolled it tight and lit it up and offered it to me but I said no. I had my rules. Otis took it, though, and I was pretty impressed that he could smoke it without coughing. He even knew how to blow smoke rings.

“You known Anthony for long?” I asked him. He put out another set of rings and passed the thing to Anthony, who didn't seem to mind that we were talking about him like he wasn't there.

“Don't matter,” he said. “He takes care of me. He's all the family I got now.”

Anthony nodded.

“Where's the rest of your family? Like your normal family.”

“Where's yours?” I didn't like him making the comparison between the two of us because I might've been a thief and a liar and possibly a murderer but I wasn't any sort of pothead that did God-knows-what with some strange white Indian. At least Henry was just a

friend and when I lived with him he'd had his grandma there and all of that. "My family is in Texas," he said. "But I ain't talked to them in a long time. Anthony says they don't want me talking to them any more."

"Don't tell him anymore," Anthony said. "Ain't any of his business." He reached out and slapped Otis on the back of the head. I didn't like Otis at all but for a second I sort of felt sorry for him so I told Anthony that we were just making conversation and I stepped between them.

"Can you do a proper Christian funeral?" I asked him. Otis started to laugh and Anthony shot him a glance that said shut the hell up.

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about a Christian burial," he said. "I'm only acquainted with the rituals of my people."

"The Apache?"

"The Sac and Fox. I'm a spirit man after all, and I can only deal with the spirits through the rituals I know."

"Henry isn't going to like that," I said. "How'd you come to be a shaman or a spirit man or a priest or whatever it is that you are anyway?"

He sat up straight in his chair and folded his hands up in his lap like he was going to tell a real formal story or something.

"My dead ancestors told me so," he said.

"How'd they do that?"

"My grandfather came to me in a dream."

"Like a ghost?"

"Sort of."

“So you believe in ghosts?”

“Spirits live among us always, Goose. There’s some right here right now. The spirit of that dead lady is sitting over her corpse right now, waiting on us to release her into another world.”

I looked at Henry’s grandma, facedown on the floor, but I didn’t see anything. I asked him if he could see it and he said sure, that’s why he was a shaman.

“So what if I told you that I’d seen a ghost lady with hooves for feet and –”

“You seen *what?*”

“A woman, with hooves for feet and a snake for a tongue.”

“That’s bad news, my friend. A warning.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know.”

I was about to call him out on his spirit man nonsense when Henry came inside and told us that the grave was dug and that we could bury his grandma. He wasn’t too happy when I told him that Anthony couldn’t do a burial the Christian way.

“Well then you aren’t going to do it and you might as well get along like I told you to this afternoon. Grandma was a Christian woman and she’d want to be buried like one.”

I understood why Henry wanted his grandma to be buried like a Christian but I also thought it was a little silly on account of the fact that we were just putting her in a hole by the river and not a fancy Christian cemetery and besides I was sort of interested in what Anthony had to say about the Deer Woman even though I was half sure that he was full of it.

“Well maybe it’s not such a bad idea,” I told Henry. “If you think about it, maybe an Indian burial isn’t that much different than a Christian burial. After all, no one ever told the

Indians about Jesus or God and so the spirits or the Great Spirit or whatever they got is basically just as good if not the next best thing.” Henry slouched down in a chair at the table and then turned around and looked over his shoulder at his grandma, who I noticed for the first time was starting to smell like the inside of our refrigerator on Garden Street when they cut off the electricity.

“Well I guess whatever you can do is just as good as what I can do seeing as neither me nor Goose know how to do it the Christian way.”

I checked outside one more time to make sure there weren't any neighbors watching and even though a few of the porch lights were on I didn't see no one so I told them the coast was clear. I grabbed one of her legs and Otis grabbed the other and Anthony and Henry grabbed her by the arms and we sort of moved her through the doorway and turned her to face the front door which sort of reminded me of the time that Mom made me help her rearrange some of the furniture in the storage unit. When we got down the cinderblock steps we snuck her around the back of the trailer real quick and set her down on the ground.

“Do you think she looks alright?” Henry asked. She was wearing the same blue nightgown she'd been in since the day that I met her. Her skin didn't have any color and all the purple veins that had been running all over her face and arms looked white. Her eyes just stared straight up and I could see the reflection of the moon in them.

“She looks real nice,” I said. “But do you think we should close her eyes?” Henry pushed his hand down over her face and when he pulled his hand back only one of her eyes was closed.

“We shouldn’t bury her like she’s winking,” I said. Henry put his finger on her open eyelid and tried to push it shut with one finger but for some reason it wouldn’t go shut and she was sort of stuck in the winking position.

“Let’s just get her out of here,” Anthony said. “We can’t have anyone seeing us.

We carried her down to the hole that Henry had dug and stood at each corner with her sort of drooping down between us.

“Alright,” Anthony said. “Drop her on three.” He counted to three and we all dropped her and the water that had half filled the hole sort of splashed up on our ankles which just made all the dried red dirt turn to mud again. The hole was just deep enough for her body and the water filled up around her so that just her face and one of her hands could be seen and all the lights like the moon and stars reflected off of the water and Henry’s grandma was still winking at us.

“Now we need to send her off with something personal. She needs some important thing from her life to take with her into the spirit world.”

Henry looked at me and nodded so I ran back up through the trees to the trailer. I was still pretty nervous on account of Dad still being out there and probably looking for me and the fact that any one of the neighbors could come out and see us if they happened to wander down towards the river on top of the fact that if Moses got to barking we’d all be in hot water for sure. I didn’t know why Henry had wanted me to get some personal effects instead of doing it himself but when I got inside I realized that she didn’t own that many things anyway so it didn’t matter. I grabbed the first thing I saw which was the plastic bag filled with Precious Moments pieces but as soon as I got back to the door I felt bad because all of the

figurines were broken so I went back in her room and got her oxygen tank and mask and cigarettes, too. I was going to get her Bible, too, but I was already carrying too much.

Henry seemed to be pleased with what I got because he didn't ask any questions, he just took what I brought and dropped it on top of her. The plastic bag sort of floated, though, so we had to use the tip of the shovel to break it open and all of the white shattered pieces sort of spilled out into the water. Anthony crammed the oxygen tank down by her side and I tossed the pack of Virginia Slims by her head, where it floated. Anthony crossed his arms in front of him and then lifted them up towards the sky and we knew he was going to start so we all got kind of quiet and somber.

"Spirit world, hear me," he sort of shouted. "Comanche fathers, here me. Fill me with your spirit." Then he looked at us and opened his eyes in a real dramatic fashion like he was supposed to be a different person and I wanted to ask him if his ancestors were actually Comanche or Sac and Fox or Apache but I didn't because it would probably have been rude at the time and besides, he was filled with the spirit of his ancestors and probably didn't remember who I was anyway.

"It's fitting that we bury Mrs." He stopped. "Mrs.?"

"Ruach," Henry said.

"It's fitting that we bury Mrs. Ruach here by the banks of the Cimarron," he told us.

"*Cimarron* is hybrid word, part Mexican, part Apache, for *wanderer*. And wandering is what Mrs. Ruach's spirit will now be doing in the spirit world."

That made me think about one of the few things I did remember from school and that was that the word *planet* meant *wanderer* and I wondered what language that was in and if it was a hybrid language and I looked up at the sky and thought about how all the planets and

all the spirits were just up there, mingling together and wandering around and I thought about the word Cimarron and how everything really was sort of connected.

“She’s in the stars now, wandering,” Anthony said.

“With Jesus, of course,” Henry added.

“Of course.”

Then I quit looking up at the sky and I closed my eyes and tried to imagine Henry’s grandma flying around through outer space with Jesus holding her hand and even though it was space she could breathe because she had her oxygen mask on and Jesus put her Precious Moments back together and for some reason I was comforted and when I looked up at Henry I noticed that he was smiling and I imagined that the thought of his grandma flying around through space with Jesus holding her hand comforted him, too.

About that time Anthony started doing this pretty crazy dance around the grave and yelling and hollering some sort of jibber-jabber that I’d never heard before and I wondered if it was Apache or Comanche or Sac and Fox but was mostly worried that the neighbors would wake up. We all sort of stepped back so that he could do his dance and flail his arms and after a few laps he just stopped and held his arms back up to the sky and started shaking and yelping. I could tell all the whooping and hollering was making Henry nervous but I didn’t say anything on account of me not wanting to disturb the spirit world if that stuff is actually real.

“Amen,” Anthony said.

“Amen,” we all added.

“Is that it?” Henry asked.

“Almost,” Anthony said. “Now we have to cover our faces in mourner’s mud, purify ourselves in the nearest running water and burn down the trailer.”

“Burn down the trailer?” Henry asked.

“We’ve got to burn down the trailer so that her spirit doesn’t hang around,” Anthony said.

“We’re not burning that trailer,” Henry said. “That’s where I live. And grandma isn’t haunting no one. There’s no such thing as ghosts and besides, I got to live there.”

“Suit yourself,” Anthony said. “But we have to cover our faces in mud and wash it off so that we’re purified of the dead.”

I don’t think anyone knew much about what he was saying but we did it anyway. All four of us grabbed a handful of dirt from the pile that Henry had made while he was digging and we smeared it all over our faces like a bunch of animals or something.

“We now release Mrs. Ruach into the spirit world,” Anthony said.

He lifted his hands up to the air and then looked at me and motioned like he wanted me to join him and so I did and Henry did too and of course Otis joined in and we were all standing on the bank of the Cimarron with mud on our faces and our hands in the sky and I realized that we probably looked pretty stupid to someone on the outside and after we stood there for a couple of minutes we finally relaxed and Anthony said we could wash our faces off in the river, seeing as it was the nearest body of moving water.

“Why are we doing this?” Henry asked.

“To purify ourselves of the dead,” Anthony said. “The moving water washes us clean of the possibility of her spirit hanging around.”

Henry didn't seem to like the sound of that much but we all got down and washed the mud off of our faces in the river. As soon as Henry was clean he picked up the shovel and started covering the old lady with dirt.

"Is that it?" I asked.

"That's it," Anthony said. "Short and sweet. We don't like to spend a lot of time on the dead."

"Well I appreciate you helping and everything," Henry said. Once he had his grandma's face covered up he patted the clay a little with the end of the shovel.

"It's just my duty as a shaman," Anthony said. "Now you two be careful out here. You heard they sighted the Goodwin brothers somewhere between here and Stillwater, don't you?"

"What did those two do, anyway?" I asked.

"I got this cousin in Wewoka that did some time with one of them – Johnny. They were both in for dewies, I think," Anthony said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Driving under the influence. Where you been hiding, kid? Anyways, he told my cousin he and his brother had killed their own father. They got away with it, though, because they pinned it on some Mexican that had just strolled into town without any papers. Just ditched the knife in the bed of this pickup. It was that easy. Said they even went to the funeral and cried their eyes out despite the fact that they'd stabbed him some two hundred times all over his body. He'd been stabbed so many times that you couldn't tell he was even human any more. Killed their own father. Can you believe it?"

For some reason he looked straight at me and I sort of felt guilty for thinking about listening to that Deer Woman.

“What were they in jail for this time?” Henry asked.

“They both raped and murdered this little girl outside of Holdenville. Cold blooded motherfuckers, you know?”

“Bad motherfuckers,” Otis added. Anthony shot him a look that said that it was his story and not Otis’s.

“They couldn’t find them at first but then they caught them red-handed robbing a QuickTrip by the River Spirit Casino in Tulsa. Hi-Po just happened up for his coffee in the middle of the hold up. Pig got shot immediately but his back-up was already on the way. Motherfuckers were in a standoff for hours. Until the Goodwins ran out of ammo.”

Anthony shook our hands and said goodbye and said some word that he said was Sac and Fox for peace and wellbeing and all that. Otis just looked at the ground. We thanked them again and they left us down by the river and I watched Henry fill in the rest of the hole. I figured that Henry would want me to stay with him but I didn’t know if that was a good idea on account of Dad being out there looking for me probably and Henry’s trailer probably being the first place he looked. I was his son, after all, and I can only assume that he felt bad about kicking me out even though I was pretty happy about it. That and I bet he wanted his change back.

It was dead quiet outside except for the sound of Henry grunting and shoveling and the hum of the cicadas and it made me think about how they all shed their skins on the screen door at me and Mom’s house on Garden Street and I couldn’t help but think about how their shed skin was a lot like how we’d put mud on our faces and washed it away or the way that

Henry's grandma had left her body and moved on to the spirit world. I guess sometimes you just got to leave things behind.

"You think we did the right thing?" Henry asked. He was done filling the hole and so he stuck the end of the shovel in the ground and wiped the sweat off his head.

"Sure I think we did the right thing," I said. "Think about the other option: living with Kirby."

"But do you think God would want us to bury her like this?" he asked.

"Do you think God would want you living with Kirby?" I asked.

"I don't know what God thinks of Kirby."

He picked up the shovel and tossed his shirt over his shoulder and we headed back up to the trailer.

I should have known that those two would steal Henry's money but for some reason I didn't think about it seeing as how they were pretty friendly and so eager to help us bury Mrs. Ruach. Henry didn't even notice that the box was missing from the kitchen floor and when I pointed it out to him he didn't even really seem to care that much. He just pulled a loaf of bread out of the cabinet and started making us a couple of peanut butter sandwiches.

"We might have some jelly," he said. "You want jelly?"

"No I don't want Jelly," I told him. "Are we going to go after those two? They stole your money, Henry."

"And what are we going to do when we find them?"

I didn't really have an answer for that so I just sat there at the table and watched him spread the peanut butter on the bread and pour milk into a couple of plastic cups.

“Besides,” he said. “We got bigger things to worry about. Like figuring out how to keep the lights on in this place and how to use Grandma’s checks and where to put mine and all that stuff she used to tell me how to do. On top of the fact that we can’t have Kirby figuring out that she’s dead.”

We ate our sandwiches in silence and I couldn’t believe that the money was gone again on top of the fact that it was basically my fault again this time on account of me taking it upon myself to watch the box. Otis knew it was money and I figured that’s what they were after. I had no idea what Henry was going to do and for a second I sort of wished that I’d never met him because I’d done nothing but cause him trouble and get his money stolen and his grandma killed. I finished my milk and put the cup on the table.

“I stole that money the first time, Henry. I want you to know that. I don’t deserve your forgiving me so easily. Dad didn’t make me do it. It was my idea.” He just sat there and ate his sandwich. “I mean, I don’t deserve to be forgiven just like that,” I told him. It just didn’t make sense to me that he’d not care about the money since he’d saved it up for so long. “And it wouldn’t have gotten stolen this time, either, if we didn’t have to bring it back to the trailer from the motel. And on top of all that, I think I might have killed your grandma, too.”

He finished his milk and sat the cup on the table, right next to mine.

“It was your idea?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He stood up and started pacing up and down the living room and before I knew it he was picking up Mt. Dew cans and collecting them in his shirt like he had a baby or something and then he brought them all in the kitchen and dumped them on the floor and

started crushing them with his feet. At first he was slow and deliberate but eventually he just started slamming his feet down on cans that were already smashed and he started grunting and breathing heavy and after a while snot was starting to come out of his nose and he just bent over and put his hands on his knees and heaved and wiped the snot up and after a while I could hear him laughing. I just sat there and didn't say a word and I wasn't sure if he was going to crush me next or kick me out or whatever he could think of for basically being the one that took away everything he loved. He just kept laughing, though, and when he stood up he wasn't crying or anything. He just reached down and picked up his milk and took a sip.

“You're just a kid, Goose.”

“And what's that supposed to mean?”

“Even if it were your idea, kids can't be blamed for doing things like that. They haven't reached the age of accountability.” I was sort of relieved that he wasn't going to hurt me or anything despite the fact that I'd basically known him long enough to know that he'd never hurt me. But you never know what a man will do when you take away everything he's got.

“What's that?”

“The age of accountability is this rule that we learned about at church about how kids can't really do anything wrong because they don't know any better. I don't know what the word actually means but I know it means that kids can't really be sinners.”

“What are you talking about? I'm not a kid anymore. I take care of myself. Are you age of accountability?”

He laughed until he snorted.

“Of course I am. I’m a grown man – a grown man and I have to make an account to God for all I done, right and wrong.”

“Well I don’t think I’m age of accountability either. Too old.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he told me. “I just don’t think you’d ever wrong me.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that on account of the fact that I did wrong him when I told Dad about his money and we busted the place up and robbed them and all that but I didn’t feel as bad about him forgiving me on account of me giving him a full confession and him stomping up all those cans which had to make him feel at least a bit better and it made me wonder if you were supposed to tell the truth because it was good for the person that needed the truth or good for the person that was telling the truth. I didn’t know why Henry was always so quick to forgive me but part of me wondered if he just had to forgive me because he wanted a friend so bad. And now he needed one more than ever.

Everything was going to be okay with Henry and it made me think about how Lando had pretty much turned Han and everyone over to Darth Vader but things still turned out okay for Lando and he redeemed himself and basically became a captain of his own ship. I guess you can turn out to be a pretty big hero even if you are at one point the biggest traitor in the galaxy. I just wondered what it was that I’d have to do to be a hero.

Henry put our plates and cups in the sink and we went back to his bedroom and even though he had a small mattress he made room for me and so I squeezed in between him and the window. I could see the sky pretty good, which made me happy. It wasn’t as quiet as it had been outside, though, on account of the buzz from the one light in the trailer park that was up on a telephone pole outside of Henry’s window and I could hear Moses next door, pacing around and rattling his chain.

“What are we going to do tomorrow?” I asked.

“I don’t know – don’t know. Whatever it is, do you want to do it with me?”

“Sure,” I told him. “I’m glad I’m here.”

“Me too.”

For as long as I could I tried to stare through the orange glow of the light up at the stars and I thought about how all of the planets were wanderers. We fell asleep, and even though we had all kinds of secrets and Dad was after me and Henry’s money was gone and we didn’t know what to expect, for a moment we were kings.

When I woke up there was a gun in my face and I was sure that Dad had found me and that I was totally dead but when I really woke up I realized the man had a badge on his brown shirt and that he was some sort of policeman or sheriff or something and I was just glad that I didn’t piss my pants like the last time I had a gun pointed at me.

“Get up, son,” the man said.

Henry was already up and only in his underwear and Kirby was there and he was pacing around the room screaming how could you do it and the sheriff or whatever he was put his gun in his holster and yanked me around real hard and pulled my hands behind my back and put handcuffs on me which were cold and heavy and not at all like I expected from seeing them on TV and in the movies. About that time another four or five cops came in through the front door like a bunch of Storm Troopers and the guy with the gun took me by the arm and led me through the trailer and everyone was staring at me in my underwear and Kirby was screaming at me and calling me a murderer and that’s about the time I realized

they'd found Henry's grandma and I wondered if maybe we should have listened to Anthony and not buried her by the river.

Outside they were putting what looked like the old lady's body in a black bag into the back of a Suburban and another man was carrying the black plastic bag full of broken Precious Moments and her oxygen tank except they were all wet and covered in red mud and I wondered if they were undoing all that spirit stuff we'd done if it was even true. Kirby stumbled down the front steps of the trailer and tried to take a swing at me but the man with the gun and the handcuffs caught his arm and sort of twisted it.

“Go home, Kirby. You're drunk. You're only making things worse.”

After that he put me in the backseat of his car and I noticed that Henry was sitting in the backseat of another car and it was all happening so fast that it took me a while to realize it. The government had finally caught up with me and everything Mom ever said had come true.

Part II:
The Son

Chapter 13

It turned out the government wasn't that big of a deal after all and Mom was basically wrong and the judge in Stillwater who was actually pretty nice despite the fact that he had this wicked black cloak just like Darth Vader didn't do a thing to me even though he said it was the first time in Payne County history that they'd had a child delinquency arbitration or something for a minor that'd participated in the unlawful burial of the deceased. On top of all that it turned out that PaPa was still alive and they stuck me with him and that was basically all that happened except for I saw Henry wearing one of those orange jumpsuits like I saw the Goodwin brothers in on TV and couldn't help but feel terrible about killing his grandma and getting him arrested and all that.

PaPa was this short old man, almost as short as me, and he wore these giant, black glasses that were too big for his face and walked on a pretty sweet black cane but for the most part I didn't recognize him even though I tried to think back to my baptism or some memory of a holiday or something. The first ten minutes or so on the ride back to Cimarron me and PaPa didn't speak a word. He drove this boxy old Cadillac that had leather seats but the seats were all cracked and he had towels covering them. In between us there was a box

of Kleenex and this little Bible and a big jar of Vaseline, which pretty much explained the weird, oily smell in the car and the fact that everything I touched was greasy. After a while he opened up the jar and dipped his old finger in it and smeared a big glob of the stuff over his lips and then he started smacking them like he was eating the best piece of candy he'd ever had. It was pretty much the grossest thing I'd ever seen in my life and believe me when I tell you I've seen some pretty gross stuff.

I was happy I wasn't with the government any more but I wasn't too happy that PaPa was still alive. Not like I wanted him to be dead or anything, but him being alive just brought up so many questions like why did Mom tell me he was dead and where'd he been all this time and why was I living in a storage unit and in that hotel room when I had a nice grandpa with a Cadillac with leather seats, even if they were cracking and covered in Vaseline.

His cane was real thick and black and was leaning up on the seat between us, too, and when I looked at it real close I noticed that the silver handle wasn't a handle at all but a snake with it's mouth open and this ruby-looking stone for an eye and I remembered Curly T's belt buckle and all of a sudden got filled with this feeling of dread like this was all just planned and Curly T and PaPa, or whoever this old man was, were a part of some sort of group that had a thing for snakes and boys. I guess PaPa, or whoever was pretending to be PaPa, realized that I was sort of scared because he asked me if everything was all right.

"I thought you were dead," I told him.

He didn't answer me and I took that as a sign that he wasn't my real PaPa so I yelled at him to stop the car and he pulled over on the side of the highway. I reached for the door

handle but before I could do anything he slammed his hand down on the door lock with pretty good speed for such an old guy.

“What’s the matter with you?” he said. “Have you got no sense? We’re on the side of the highway. Where do you think you’re going?”

“You’re dead,” I told him. “PaPa’s dead and you’re in cahoots with Curly T. I know about it. I’ve seen the snake.”

I tried the handle again but he grabbed my shoulders with both hands and turned me towards him. He pushed his big, black glasses up on his nose and some of the Vaseline on his finger smeared across his nose. I was pretty worked up and wasn’t sure if I actually thought he knew Curly T, but I knew I didn’t know him and it seemed like if you had a grandpa you’d recognize him or at least feel something and I didn’t. Plus there was the fact that in the last few months I’d learned that there’s hardly anyone out there you can trust except Henry. Especially your own family.

“You mean this?” he said and he picked up his cane and kind of shoved the snake up at my face and I leaned back against the door and thought one more time about trying to make a break for it but decided that after all I’d been through, maybe he was right and the side of the highway was the last place I wanted to be.

“Yeah. I’ve seen that snake before.”

“No you haven’t,” he told me. He leaned the cane back against the seat and started petting the snake. “I bought this in Albuquerque, back when MiMa was alive. I’d just been fired from the church. I bought it as a reminder that evil is always lurking. Sometimes even in the things you lean on for support.”

He patted the snake and I noticed that he left some Vaseline on it, too.

“I thought you were dead.”

“Why would you think that?”

“That’s what Mom told me.”

He let out a big sigh and put the car back in gear and pulled out on the highway.

“I’m not dead. Your mother’s the one that’s dead.”

All of a sudden I felt this sick sensation in the pit of my stomach and I wondered why no one at the government had told me that she was dead and I realized that it was sort of my fault on account of me leaving her there alone with Curly T at Cimarron Storage and I didn’t know how I was going to go one more day with the thought that I’d killed Mom on top of Mrs. Ruach.

“Dead to me, anyway. Dead to me, dead to God. She’s given herself over to the Evil One. She’s nothing anymore but a shell of flesh, following her own passions and not the will of the Lord.”

“She’s really dead?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t spoken to her in years, not since she got back on the meth.”

“Which time?”

He looked at me and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Goose. I’m sorry you had to live like that.”

What business of it was his? Where had he been that whole time? I didn’t like the idea of some man I’d never met before talking about Mom like that because things hadn’t been that bad and she’d gotten herself cleaned up when we were living on Garden Street and he must’ve not known anything about what it’s like to have a problem with meth, because if

he did than he'd know that sometimes you get back on it a while and things get worse before they get better again.

"You don't know my mom," I told him. "My mom isn't dead and you're a fool for telling her son that she is. That's just cruel."

I pretty much wanted him to die right there of a heart attack or cancer or whatever it is that gets old people and kills them and I reached out and tried to punch him right in his stupid glasses, only I missed and sort of punched him in the side of the throat and when I did that he started coughing and the car sort of started jerking around and someone honked their horn at us and it took him a while to get the car back under control. He picked his cane up with his free hand like he was going to hit me with it, which was pretty much what I expected the old man to do, but when he looked at me he got soft again and put the thing down.

"Don't you talk about my Mom that way," I told him and I meant it. I'd been through enough to know that if I had to light out on my own again I could and I would.

"I'm sorry," he said as he rubbed his throat. "Sheriff gave me that bag," he said and motioned to the back seat. "Said he thought it belonged to you."

I looked back at the backseat and there was my backpack and for some reason I was happier than I'd been in a while and so I leaned over and dragged it up front and opened it and there was my Star Wars books, just where I'd left them. I was glad to have them, too, because I still hadn't gotten to *Return of the Jedi* and I figured I'd have a lot of free time on my hands since I was going to be living with this old tub of Vaseline and even if he did want me to go to school he couldn't make me since it was summer.

"We've got a lot to do," he said. "We've got to get you trained up in the way of the Lord. He's got a plan for you, Goose. I can tell you that much. He's got a plan for us all."

“Just one thing,” I said. “Why ain’t I ever seen you around Cimarron if you been here all along?”

“I don’t come around Cimarron,” he said. “Nothing there for me but bad memories.”

PaPa’s house was way out on 33, several miles down from the motel and Piney River Mobile Homes and everywhere I’d been living over the last few months. It was a pretty good-sized house, bigger than anything I’d ever lived in, and you had to drive down a stretch of gravel road to get to it. When he parked the car out front I noticed that there was another house behind PaPa’s across another pretty big field except that house didn’t have any paint on it and there was plants growing up the sides.

“Who lives there,” I said.

“No one’s lived there since MiMa and I moved in more than thirty years ago. It was the original farmhouse for this property back when the town was settled. It’s just rot, now. Someone built our house years later. Probably because it was closer to the well.”

“So it’s pretty old?”

“Over a century.”

Everything smelled like Vaseline on the inside of his house, too, and all the furniture was covered with towels, just like the seats in his car. I thought about asking him about all the towels but I didn’t have much to say to the old man anyway on account of me not being sure if I could trust him yet, and besides, it’s sort of rude to ask old people about their old habits and I didn’t want to stir anything up since I felt pretty bad about hitting him in the throat.

The downstairs was all just one big room and there was a living room by the front door and a kitchen in the back and then there was stairs at the back that I imagined led up to the bedrooms or something. I dropped my backpack on the floor by the couch and just stood there.

“You want something to eat?” he said.

I was pretty much starving and hadn't had anything in the last couple of days except the peanut butter sandwich Henry made me the day before and the peanut butter sandwich they'd given me at the courthouse, but I didn't want to sound too needy so I just told him I could eat something but that I wasn't too hungry. He pulled a pan out from underneath his stove and then started rooting around in the fridge, which looked pretty full.

“You like egg sandwiches?”

I shrugged and he put a little butter in the bottom of the pan and cracked a couple of eggs and before I knew it, I was sitting at the table with an egg sandwich and potato chips and a glass of milk in front of me. I could've eaten the whole meal in too bites, but, like I said, I didn't want to look too needy or thankful on account of me not fully trusting the old man yet, so I took small bites. I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten real food and the more I ate the more my stomach sort of started hurting like it wasn't use to such things. PaPa sat down at the table across from me with a glass of water and took off his glasses.

“So how long you been living with Henry?” he said.

I didn't answer him. I just chewed my food and thanked my lucky stars I had some real food. I felt sort of bad ignoring him on account of the fact that I was eating his food and about to be living in his house, but I couldn't get the image of that snake's mouth at the end of his cane out of my mind, which reminded me of that time that the Deer Woman had sat in

my lap and kissed me and I wondered what an old pastor would think about his grandson cooking meth and kissing a what Henry thought was a demon.

“When’s the last time you saw your mother?” he said.

I sat there and ate my food until it was gone and didn’t say a word.

“You want another one?”

I shook my head and he got back up and put some more butter in the pan and I waited for what seemed like an hour until there was another sandwich sitting in front of me and this time I didn’t try to act cool, I just ate as fast as I could. My head was swimming with all kinds of questions about Henry and what happened to him and whether or not I should tell PaPa that Mom’s living in his storage unit, but none of it really seemed to bother me that much as long as I kept shoveling hot egg and mayonnaise in my mouth.

“I guess you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” he said.

“Well I know that,” I told him. “I pretty much do what I want when I want to do it.”

He put his glasses back on and rubbed the sides of his head.

“You got a streak of the Evil One in you, boy,” he said. “Just like your mother. But don’t you worry about a thing. We’re going to get that evil right out of you.”

I didn’t know how he knew I had evil in me and I sort of got this feeling like I was being watched but couldn’t see the person that was watching me. I hadn’t told the government about cooking meth with Dad or smoking a cigarette or stealing Henry’s money or killing his grandma, and I especially hadn’t told them about how the Deer Woman but her snake tongue down in my throat and put something in me or took something away, so I didn’t know how PaPa could know what was in me.

“Let me show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

We went upstairs and there were bedrooms there just like I thought. PaPa opened one of the doors and waved his hand like I was supposed to go in. I hated it. The curtains were pink and the blanket on the bed was pink and there were these paintings of flowers hanging on the wall and I immediately knew it was a girl's room and since Mom was the only girl PaPa and MiMa had I knew it must've been hers. I sat my bag down on the bed and turned around to ask PaPa if it really was Mom's room but he was already gone. I shut the door and started looking around and realized there wasn't a whole lot of stuff in the room. There was a desk under the flower paintings but there wasn't anything on it except a picture. I knew right away it was Mom but she didn't look anything like I remembered her. She was young, like maybe my age or a bit older and she was wearing a dress and standing by the front door of the very house I was in. Her dress looked real nice like the sort of dress that you'd wear to church, except her hair was all messed up and she was barefoot and had mud all over her legs and she was smiling and holding a frog in her hand. It was sort of hard to think of Mom being my age on account of all her problems and I wondered what had happened to her. I mean, I never really thought about the fact that she was alive before me even though it makes perfect sense.

I pushed the pink curtains aside and looked out the window. I could see the field that was sort of like a backyard except the grass wasn't mowed and I could see that house that was like a hundred years old. It had windows but it didn't look like there was any glass in them and all I could think about was how crazy it was that Mom had looked at that same old house before I was born and how it was even crazier that some kid probably lived in that house before Mom was even born and probably before MiMa and PaPa was born even

though I couldn't really imagine how long ago that was. The front door of the old place was open wide but while I was standing there staring it just closed all of a sudden. I let the curtain drop and I stepped back and I got that same feeling I did when I was looking at the end of PaPa's cane but I told myself there wasn't anything going on and it was probably just the wind.

There wasn't any way I was going to go back downstairs and talk to PaPa, so I just laid down on the bed and pulled *Return of the Jedi* out of my bag and started reading. I was relieved to find out that they didn't forget about Han and how he was frozen in carbonite because I was pretty sure after the last one that Han was a goner and that that was going to be the end of them. It was nice to see all of the same characters in a new place and fighting someone that wasn't the Empire but I couldn't help but think that Jabba didn't deserve to die on account of the fact that even though he had Han hostage, Han did owe him money and you don't want to mess with crooks like Jabba. You just can't trust them.

About the time it started to get dark I could hear people talking downstairs although I couldn't make out who it was. I left Mom's room and sort of snuck to the end of the stairs but all I could hear was PaPa's voice and I couldn't hear what he was saying so I went about halfway down the stairs and listened again where I could see him from over the banister. He was just sitting on the couch, alone, rocking back and forth and speaking in some language that I'd never heard before which was pretty much one of the scariest things I'd ever seen. And I've seen some scary things.

"Colla rocka dupree amos," is what I thought I heard him saying over and over again. I crept down the rest of the stairs and stood behind the couch, right behind where he was sitting and rocking and going on. After a while he raised his hands up in the air and the way

he was holding his cane that snake looked right at me and its ruby-looking eyes sort of glinted from the little bit of light that was still left outside and I froze right where I was. “Persee! Persee! Aloch mena torrentey. Save the boy! Anoint the boy!” His voice was getting louder and louder and the louder he got the faster he rocked back and forth. I walked around the side of the couch and stood right in front of him. His eyes were open but they were sort of rolled back in his head like and it looked like he was about to start foaming at the mouth.

“PaPa?” He stopped and opened his eyes and looked right at me. “What’s going on?” He dropped his cane and leaned back on the couch and panted like he’d just come in from running a marathon.

“For heaven’s sake, Goose, you’ve quenched the Spirit,” he said.

“I what?”

“You’ve quenched the Spirit. The Spirit of God was moving through me and now He’s gone. Vanished.” He leaned forward and motioned for me to come sit by him but I stood where I was.

“What in the world were you saying, PaPa?”

“I wasn’t saying anything. The spirit was speaking through me, with the tongues of angels.”

I didn’t really know that angels had tongues and I certainly didn’t know that they would talk like that if they did but it was the craziest thing I’d ever seen so I sort of played along.

“What was the spirit saying? And why does it have to look so strange?”

“You think that what you saw was strange?” he said. “Most assuredly I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” I didn’t know who the son of man was but I assumed it was just me because I was the son of a man, even if that man happened to be a pretty mean guy that cooked meth in his hotel room, but before I could ask him for sure, PaPa sat up real straight and started talking all crazy again.

“Burach atoni saliki, barab! Burach atoni saliki, barab!”

The room sort of started to get small and the sun finally went down all the way and it was completely dark except for me and the old man and he was stiff as a board and talking crazy talk or speaking in the tongues of angels or whatever he called it and I started to get that feeling again that someone was watching me even though I didn’t know where from. I hollered at him to stop a couple of times and when he wouldn’t I picked up his cane and knocked him on the knee and he came out of his trance and looked at me like I spit in his face.

“You need to get saved, Goose,” he said.

“From what?”

“From the unclean sprit that you’re carrying with you.”

I didn’t know how he knew about the Deer Woman but I started thinking that maybe all the nonsense he was saying was true and I did have a dirty spirit and that’s why everything felt so weird out at PaPa’s house and that’s why it felt like someone was constantly watching me.

“How do I get saved?” I said.

“You’ve got to get Jesus into your heart and get filled with the Spirit,” he said.

“What’s the Spirit?”

He looked at me like he couldn’t believe what I was saying and pushed his big glasses up on his nose.

“The Spirit is God’s presence in this world. It is the force that drives all things that are good and reveals God’s will to us.”

I didn’t know what to think of that. It sounded sort of familiar like it was something I’d heard before but it was still kind of hokey and didn’t make a lot of sense but part of me did want to listen to what the old man had to say. He was my PaPa after all. But then I remembered how he said that Mom was dead and that he’d just been sitting pretty in his house, eating egg sandwiches and potato chips while me and Mom lived in his storage unit and ate food that Mom stole from the gas station or bought with money she got from those men and I got filled up with so much hate and rage that I wanted to punch him in the throat again or maybe even do something worse. I couldn’t do anything, though, because he was putting a roof over my head and feeding me real food so instead I just cussed him and told him to go to hell.

“I don’t believe that nonsense,” I told him. “Sounds like something made up to me. Are you trying to fool me?”

That’s when he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me in real close to him and put his hand on my head and started spitting and speaking in tongues and begging God to get that dirty spirit out of me. I didn’t want his hand on my head and certainly didn’t want his crazy talk spoken over me, which pretty much just sounded like some of the nonsense that Anthony had been spewing when we buried Henry’s grandma, so I jerked away with all the energy that I had and I ran. As I was running up the stairs I heard him yell at me.

“Repent, Goose! Repent! The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel!”

As soon as I got to Mom’s room I shut the door behind me and locked it and crawled into bed and covered my head and tried to stomach the fact that I was living with somebody that was an absolute lunatic. I mean, Henry was religious and all that, but he didn’t ever do anything to me as crazy as that. The only person I’d ever seen act that crazy before was Dad, who was pretty much tweaked out of his mind all the time. Where did he get off, anyway, telling me I needed Jesus in my heart? How’s a man going to get into a boy’s heart? I wished Henry was there so he could answer all of my questions and explain to me what PaPa meant by all of that but part of me thought that Henry might not even know and the other part of me knew that Henry was gone, tied up in his orange suit somewhere in the bowels of the government where they keep slow people for reprogramming.

I turned on the lamp next to the bed and tried to get my mind off of everything by reading some more but it hardly worked. Luke went back to Dagobah but it wasn’t any use. Yoda was dying and all he had to say was that Darth Vader was Luke’s father, which everyone already knew from the last story. I couldn’t help but think of how old Yoda was and how PaPa felt about that old and I wondered if Luke would of run off because Yoda tried to put his hands on him and fill him with the spirit. I figured he probably wouldn’t and I felt sort of bad for being so mean to the old man and that’s when I realized why what he said about the spirit sounded so familiar to me, like something that Yoda or Obi-Wan had said about the Force and how it binds the galaxy together or something like that. What if PaPa was trying to tell me something important and I just couldn’t hear it because I really did have

some sort of spirit following me around, quenching everyone else's spirit? Sure, it sounded stupid, but the more I thought of it the more it sort of made sense.

Luke was sort of the one that was chosen, after all. He was the only one that could kill Darth Vader and even though I didn't know then what was going to happen, I sort of knew that Luke would kill Darth Vader and that he would bring order back to the Force and I sort of started to wonder if maybe I was the chosen one like Luke Skywalker and it sort of started to make sense why everything was happening to me the way that it was.

I didn't know much about Jesus even though I was baptized and all that but from what I did know he battled demons and empires and evil things and saved the world and stuff like that and I realized that he might be the sort of guy that I wanted in my heart like PaPa said especially if there was any hope of me being like Luke Skywalker and saving everyone.

I wasn't totally sure, though, because most of it sort of sounded kind of crazy and I really wished Henry was there because he could've run the idea through real science and told me if what I was thinking was totally crazy. I knew he believed in Jesus and probably the spirit, too, but I'd never seen him act like a lunatic and babble in some words that only angels knew. I didn't even know where Henry was to ask him and I decided then that maybe Henry was one of the people that I needed to save. Henry and Mom and even Dad and anyone else that needed help like me. Maybe not. I rolled over and looked out the window through the crack in the curtains and tried to make out that ancient house through the darkness and that's when I saw that the front door was wide open.

Chapter 14

Even though I still didn't know if I was going to stick around PaPa's – especially if he was planning on sending me back to school in the fall – I thought it was probably a good idea to check the place out a bit. He made me bacon for breakfast and used the grease for gravy. I probably could have stuck around just on account of all the great food the old man kept giving me, but I still wasn't sure how I felt about all the speaking in tongues and the fact that Mom had grown up there and despite the fact that I was pretty sure I loved her, I knew there was no chance in hell that I wanted to end up like her, even though I was pretty sure that I was probably already headed down that path.

After breakfast, PaPa sat down on one of the towels on his couch in the living room and sort of went into a trance. At first I thought that he was sleeping but then I heard him sort of mumbling in those weird tongues under his breath. When I went around to the side of the couch it looked like he was sleeping again – his eyes were closed and there was some drool running from a glob of Vaseline at the corner of his mouth and I wondered if that was why he had towels laying around all over the place. But just when I thought he was asleep for sure his chest sort of heaved like he was coming up for one last breath and he started

mumbling something about “witchey tawney forburt.” The only thing worse than old people is crazy old people that talk in tongues.

Next to the sliding glass door that opened up to the backyard there was a picture frame and the words “AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD” were sort of sewn into the background but there wasn’t any picture or nothing. It was strange, I thought, because I couldn’t imagine PaPa ever sewing or being into any sort of girly crafty bullshit, and besides, there wasn’t anyone in his household besides him to serve the Lord, anyway. And if “household” means family then it isn’t true – Mom and me certainly weren’t serving the Lord and MiMa was dead. And you can’t serve no one when you’re dead.

I slid the door open and a warm gust of wind burst in through the room and I turned to see if it’d woken up PaPa but he was still just sitting there, mumbling like an angel. There wasn’t anything on his tiny back porch except for a stack of firewood and about a hundred grasshoppers, which by the sound of it had built a giant city right there in PaPa’s backyard. I picked up a piece of firewood to start smashing the grasshoppers but when I picked up the log I saw a tarantula crawl to the end of another piece and slip inside a hole at the end and I decided that maybe I shouldn’t be digging in places that hadn’t been touched for years.

The grass was as high as my waist and bleached by the sun, which I could feel burning down on my neck. I didn’t know why so many people in Cimarron were always talking about how proud they were of living in the country and not in the city like people in Stillwater or people like Mom who didn’t know how to make a living out of the soil like God intended. PaPa didn’t make his living out of the soil. What was so special about the country anyway? There isn’t no shade unless there’s trees and there’s bugs all over the place and the

yard is too big to mow and there's giant spiders crawling around, waiting to crawl up inside of you and steal your soul.

I could hear the grass crunching under my feet as I made my way across his acreage and every once in a while a grasshopper would jump out from under my feet and fly at my face. The old farmhouse was just a hundred feet away from me and I couldn't help but wonder if I'd get in trouble for going in there and, besides, there was something creepy about the way that door kept closing and shutting the night before. Either someone was living there or something was happening that I wasn't ready to think about yet.

When I got closer I could finally see that the house was supposed to be painted yellow and all the shutters – at least the shutters that were left – had once been white. Now it just sort of looked like piss and mud or the inside of the bathroom in Dad's hotel room. There wasn't no porch, just a bunch of cinderblocks stacked up like stairs like most of the trailers back at Piney River, and the door was kind of a pink color. It must've been red once. I tried to imagine the whole place: yellow and white with a big red door and maybe a real porch with kids on it, playing and chasing like kids are supposed to do, and I thought about Mom and wondered if she'd ever stood right where I was standing and tried to imagine what things might've been like once. That's when I heard someone say my name from one of the open windows.

“What are you doing, Goose?”

A grasshopper jumped up and flew in the window, making a sound like a zipper.

“Hello?”

That's when I felt a hand come down on my shoulder and all I could think about was running, but I couldn't go anywhere on account of that hand holding me tight but when I turned around I realized it was just PaPa.

"What are you doing, Goose?"

I punched him in the stomach and he doubled over.

"What do you think you're doing scaring me like that?"

I doubled over, too, and started breathing really heavy on account of all the feelings that just went through me. Something knocked me over the head and when I looked up I realized PaPa was sort of thumping me with the snake on the end of his cane.

"You got to learn to stop punching me," he said.

I didn't say anything but I also didn't say anything about how I *wasn't* going to quit hitting him and he gave me a look like he understood that I understood.

"You're not allowed to go into that house," he said. "Too dangerous. Animals. Creaky boards. I even found a couple of Mexicans living in there last year. Probably wasn't the first time folks squatted in that place. You can see it right from the highway."

"Folks live in there?"

"Well, not now. Just stay away, you hear me?"

He made like he was going to thump me with his cane again.

"Okay, okay," I said.

"Now we got to get you to Wal-Mart and get you out of those rags. A decent boy's got to have decent clothes."

We loaded up in his Cadillac and were in Stillwater in no time. Not only was I living with someone that cooked me pretty good food and didn't beat me up or anything besides knocking me in the head with his cane once in a while. It didn't bother me too much that he was a little crazy and sat around on the couch all the time, rocking and mumbling in crazy talk and lurking around the house and acting mysterious in general.

“We've got to get you ready for school in the fall.”

I knew he was going to start in on school, like a kid can't learn anything about the world unless he's cooped up all day with a bunch of kids that haven't really seen much of the world and a teacher that's basically the same way. I'd learned more about government and religion and science in the last few months than I'd ever learned at school with all those idiots. PaPa seemed pretty dead set on me going, though, and it was a chance to take a ride to Stillwater, so I let it go.

I'd never been to Wal-Mart. I hadn't been to Stillwater or any other big city for that matter except for when Mom took me to Payless once and when we went to get my teeth cleaned that one time and when me and Henry got hauled off to the courthouse. I couldn't believe how big the Wal-Mart was. First off, the parking lot is as big as some of the wheat fields in Cimarron and for some reason, PaPa parked all the way at the back of the lot next to the Burger King and we had to walk the whole way even though there were plenty of spots up near the front.

“Can we go to Burger King when we're done?”

“There's nothing wrong with my food.”

I thought the outside of Wal-Mart looked humungous, but the inside basically blew me away. It's so big that they have to have these special beams up on the ceiling just to

support it and there's birds living up there like it's the sky and sometimes you'll hear one squawk and I kept waiting for one to swoop down and attack us. And they got these giant florescent lights that make it look sort of like pictures and paintings and stuff I've seen of heaven. The floors are white and the ceiling's white and you can buy anything you can imagine right there in one place: clothes, fruit, candy, toilet paper. All of it. PaPa said you can even get your medicine there and buy a TV. There were people all over the place, filling up their grocery carts with stuff they were going to buy and there was music coming down from up in the beams with the birds and a constant beeping noise came from the front of the store that PaPa said was people buying things. People buying things all day long. Mom used to tell me that we couldn't buy toilet paper because we didn't have the money. We couldn't buy nothing, and here were people that couldn't buy enough. They were just forced to stop when their carts got too full.

I didn't want PaPa to know that I was too excited about him buying me new clothes – after all, I'd made it on my own with the same t-shirt and cut-offs just fine, anyway – so when he told me I could pick out three new shirts and three new pairs of pants I had to sort of turn to the side so that he didn't catch me grinning a little. I mean, I might have been just fine with the clothes I had but there's nothing wrong with getting a few new things now and then, especially when you never really got any new things to begin with.

You wouldn't believe all the clothes they have. Racks and racks of t-shirts and church shirts and blue jeans that weren't cut off yet and church pants. And then there were whole rows just of underwear and socks and boxer shorts and pajamas. PaPa got me a couple bags of socks and underwear while I picked out shirts. I picked a blue church shirt with some green stripes across the front and a t-shirt that was red and white striped that reminded

me a bit of a book they used to have at school called *Find That Waldo* or something like that, and this pretty wicked black t-shirt that had a skull and cross bones on it. I found PaPa looking at a rack of belts with a bunch of bags of socks and underwear stuffed under his arms.

“What do you have there?”

“My shirts.”

I tossed them up on his shoulder but when they started to slide off he reached for them and all my socks and underwear fell out from under his arms and onto the floor. I told him I was sorry and bent down to start picking them up and that’s when he bumped me on the head again with his cane.

“I said I was sorry,” I told him.

“You’re not wearing this.”

He held up the shirt with the skull and cross bones.

“Why not?”

“I won’t have you wearing such Satanic symbols in my house. No sir.”

I traded him the socks and underwear for the t-shirt and turned around. That was just great: there was no way that I was ever going to look cool when I went back to school – if I went back to school – if the old man didn’t let me wear the sorts of things a boy has to wear to look tough and cool.

“And what are you going to do with this?” I turned around and he was holding up the blue church shirt I picked out. “Isn’t this a bit stuffy for a boy your age?”

“That’s for church,” I said. “Unless I decide to go to church with you.”

His eyes got big and then turned into a glare.

“I don’t go to church. Haven’t stepped foot in it since they asked me to step down.”

That’s was just perfect: I couldn’t be Satanic and I couldn’t go to church. What was I supposed to do with myself?

“Why’d you get fired?”

“I was *asked to step down* because of that whore that you call a mother.”

I thought about punching him again but then remembered our agreement and the fact that he had that cane, which he never hurt me too hard with and I was starting to think maybe he never would, but you never know.

“Mom isn’t no whore,” I said.

“Said if I wasn’t fit to keep my family in line than I certainly wasn’t fit to keep them in line.”

“She’s no whore.”

“Good riddance,” he said. “Good riddance to bad rubbish. They can keep themselves in line. All I ever did was teach the Word. And if a Christian needs anything more than the Word, it’s Satan he’s serving and no one else.”

Even though he kept calling Mom a whore I sort of felt sorry for the old man. I mean, I could already tell in just a couple of days that he was real serious about God and the Spirit and all of that spiritual stuff and it must have been real sad when they asked him to quit what he loved doing. Sort of like how the government said I couldn’t see Henry anymore.

“You need to pick out some jeans,” he said. “No shorts.”

When we got to the register, it felt like PaPa had sort of forgot that I’d brought up him being fired and not being able to go to church and the fact that Mom was a whore even

though I knew down in the bottom of my heart that there was no way Mom was a whore on account of the fact that she loved me and warned me about all the evil out there like the government and the Deer Woman and Dad. This thought popped up in my head that maybe those things weren't that evil after all because they didn't really do me any harm except for Dad who pointed a gun at me and told me he was going to kill me on a few occasions. Maybe Mom was trying to scare me for some other reason.

“You want some candy or something?”

PaPa pulled an Almond Joy off of the shelf and waved it at me like I was some kind of dog. I opened my mouth and put my finger down my throat and made the best gagging sound I could make.

“No candy?”

“Sure I want candy. I'm a kid, aren't I? But I'd rather swallow a snake than eat an Almond Joy. That stuff's for old people and people that don't have mouths or brains.”

PaPa laughed and I reached for a Butterfinger and he nodded.

“Suit yourself,” he said. “But I'm getting an Almond Joy.”

The woman at the register had long black hair and bright red lipstick and she smiled and winked at me when we got to where she was and all of a sudden I didn't want to put my underwear up on the big conveyor belt that was carrying everything to the machine that made all that beeping.

“Can you put those up here for me, sweetie?” She smiled and snapped her gum. PaPa looked down at me.

“Go on,” he said. “We got to buy them.”

I had them behind my back and wouldn't budge so PaPa just grabbed them out of my hands and put them up on the conveyor belt. I could feel my cheeks burning.

"Getting some new clothes for when school starts up?" she asked.

I stood there, burning.

"Yes ma'am," PaPa said. "We're going to get this boy right with the Lord and get him an education. Been living with his Godless mother too long."

We might've had an agreement that I wouldn't hit him anymore but there certainly wasn't any part of it that said I couldn't kick him, so that's just what I did. Right in the shin. The old man winced and pretended like he was laughing and pointed at me.

"See? He's still got a streak of the devil in him."

He handed the lady some money and she made him some change.

"Maybe these new clothes will help get you a girlfriend."

She smiled at me and winked again and snapped her gum and I got this feeling down in the pit of my stomach like I did when I saw the Deer Woman in Dad's hotel room and that feeling started spreading all over my body and all I could think about was holding that cashier lady's hand and taking her for a walk and showing her my new life in the country in Cimarron and maybe even laying down with her on a blanket out in PaPa's backyard and telling her the story of who used to live in that old house and maybe even kissing her and putting my hands on her a little. I burned.

"This boy'll have no such thing," PaPa said. I snapped out of my daydream and realized that he was pretty mad about something. He slammed his cane down on the counter and put his finger in the cashier's face like he wanted to wipe some of her red lipstick off on his finger and put it on his own lips and he started shaking and shouting.

“No Whore of Babylon is going to ruin it for me *this* time. This one’s *mine* and he isn’t going to be tempted by no woman. Women’s the last thing this boy needs in his life. He doesn’t need his whore mother and he doesn’t need you.”

The lady was backed up all the way to her cash register by the time he was finished like he was waving a knife at her and when he finished she told him that he needed to leave.

Not much actually happened, but I couldn’t look at PaPa the same after that moment. He wasn’t as angry or hurtful as Luke or Kirby or Dad, but something about the way he threw that cane down and tightened up every muscle in his body and yelled at that woman terrified me. It was like some sort of spirit came down from the giant beams in the Wal-Mart and hung around him for a moment and made him the meanest man you’d ever seen. He may not have been as mean as Luke or Kirby but whatever it was they had, PaPa had it too. When he grabbed me by the hand and started to drag me out the door, the handle of his cane was looking straight at me, and I understood what PaPa meant when he said there was a little evil in everything. Even the things you lean on for support.

When we got back out to the parking lot PaPa seemed to be cooled off a bit so I tried to figure it out what it was that made him so mad back in the store.

“You got something against women?”

He just ignored me and kept on across the parking lot, clicking his cane on the blacktop with every step.

“You got some kind of problem with women?”

He turned and looked at me with that same look he’d given to the pretty lady back at the register. His eyes were almost shut and his greasy lips were puckered up like he was going to give someone a kiss.

“It was woman that bit the apple,” he said. “It was woman that cut off Samson’s hair. It was woman that God compared his whoring people to. It was woman I got instead of the boy God promised me.”

I really didn’t know what he was talking about except for the fact that apparently God had promised him something and I felt even sadder for him for losing his job because the last preacher you want to fire is the kind of preacher that can speak straight to God.

“What’d God promise you?” I asked.

“He promised me a boy,” PaPa said. “I begged him for a boy. I promised him that I would raise him up to be a prophet, a man of God. And He promised me one. But instead I got your mother, who never did anything but make my life hell.”

“Mom was supposed to be a man?”

He pulled a white handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose into it. When he pulled it away from his nose I could see the yellow snot hanging down like a cable on a bridge I’d seen once on TV.

“I was promised a boy,” he said. “I didn’t have any use for a daughter. And she knew it.”

All of a sudden I didn’t feel as sorry for PaPa anymore and I felt more sorry for Mom. I tried to imagine her up in that room her whole life, watching the old farmhouse out her window, trying her hardest to be the boy that PaPa wanted her to be. I wanted to say something that would hurt the old man. I didn’t want to punch him or kick him or hurt him in that way at all – I wanted to say something that hurt him real deep, something that hurt him like he hurt Mom when he told her she should’ve been a boy. Something that PaPa was but couldn’t change.

“I guess God doesn’t keep his promises,” I said.

He stopped and turned to me, but instead of showing the hurt I wanted him to feel, he just smiled at me with those Vaseline glistening lips.

“No Goose,” he said and he put his hand on my head and messed my hair. “God keeps his promise just fine. That daughter turned out to be of some use, I guess. And always remember that women are good for at least one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“One of the first promises God ever made concerned woman. It was a promise he made to the Evil One. *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed.* It’s the seed of woman going to crush the Evil One’s head.”

Chapter 15

When we got home I basically just locked myself in my room and tried to keep to myself. I tried to read a little, but for the first time in I don't know how long my *Star Wars* books couldn't really keep my interest. I watched the old farmhouse for a while and waited to see if anyone would open the door or move around in one of the windows, but nothing was going on there either. The room sort of started to feel a little like a prison. Even though I'd been in plenty of places that most folks would consider a prison, Mom's old bedroom felt like one more than anywhere I'd been. Everything was pink and all I could do was wonder why they'd paint her room pink if they wanted her to be a boy so bad. Did MiMa want Mom to be a boy? Did MiMa talk to God too?

I knew one thing for sure: Henry would've made sense of all of it for me in about five minutes. He'd use science and religion that wasn't as kooky as PaPa's brand to help me figure out what kind of people I came from and how I should behave myself when I was with them. That's one thing that Henry had going for him: he always knew how to smooth things over and understood things even when they were all upside-down and crazy and things were happening like your own brother was beating the hell out of you.

I flopped down on the bed like maybe I could sleep but there was no hope there, neither. I was too wound up and the sun was still too bright. I closed my eyes anyway and thought about Henry and what he'd do in this situation and it suddenly sort of made sense to me that it wasn't Henry that did all the thinking and smoothing over, it was the Lord. That's what Henry would say at least. I'd never paid much attention to all of his religious talk – I just thought that that was for some people and not for me – but for the first time in my life I started to wonder if maybe all the talk out there about Jesus and the Lord was right. Maybe even PaPa was sort of right even though there was a streak of the snake in him like everybody else. And if I couldn't have Henry around at least I could have Jesus around, if that's how that worked. No one was beating me up or dying on me anymore but I still felt like I needed some protection – the scary thing gets even scarier when you can't see where it is. I was starting to feel like there was a lion or something out in the tall grass of PaPa's backyard, circling around in the dark and waiting to eat me.

It was hard for me to imagine a dead guy living in your heart and telling you what to do and how to act but it sort of sounded perfect, too. First off a dead guy can't get killed and second of all if he's in your heart he can't get taken away like everybody else in my life had been and on top of all that if I had Jesus in my heart I would get the Spirit, too, and that meant that I would be able to save all the people that had left me on account of all their woes and demons and I could be the one that made everything right just like Luke Skywalker. I wouldn't have to be afraid of PaPa anymore and no matter what happened I'd know the way, because all that stuff that Henry talked about would be in my heart, forever.

I went downstairs and sure enough PaPa was back on the couch again, mumbling and drooling and being all spiritual. I didn't want to risk him or me getting scared from the whole process of waking him up so I just hollered as loud as I could.

“PaPa!”

He grunted and sucked up some of the drool coming out of the corner of his mouth.

“PaPa! Wake up!”

His head sort of bobbed and he looked up at me and after a while of examining me like I might have been a space alien he got this big grin on his face and I was happy to give him the news.

“I want to get Jesus in my heart.”

He stood up pretty quick – at least pretty quick for an old man – and left his cane on the couch and put his arms around me and buried his face in my chest and even though I couldn't see what he was doing I could feel his chest heaving and hear him sobbing like a baby and I realized that he was crying all over me and even though I was sort of scared of him and hated him for being mean to Mom I was glad to make him happy and to do whatever he wanted to get Jesus in my heart, even if he was getting old man tears and Vaseline all over my new shirt.

He fell down on his knees and pulled me down with him and put my hands in his hands and even though it all felt a little weird and like I was doing something that maybe I shouldn't be doing, I let him do whatever he wanted to do because I wanted to know for sure that I had Jesus in my heart. PaPa looked straight up and that's when I could tell for sure that he had been crying.

“Thank you, Lord,” he said. “Thank you for delivering on your promise, even after all these years. Thank you for bringing this little sheep back into our fold.”

I didn't know what he was talking about but it seemed appropriate for me to say thank you, too, and so I did. PaPa smiled and some of his tears ran down my face and into the corners of my mouth and I could taste how salty they were.

He put his hands on my shoulders and pushed me away so that he could look at me and even though he was crying he had this smile on his face and then he pulled me back in and planted a big, nasty kiss of my forehead and he told me to repeat after him.

“Lord, I know that I am a sinner, and that I have broken your commandments.”

I was kind of prepared for that because even though I didn't know much about getting Jesus in your heart I knew that I'd have to say that I was a sinner, which I'd thought about a lot, especially the running away from home and helping Dad cook meth and the stealing and smoking I'd done and so I said what he told me to say and even though I'd thought about all of that stuff it felt different when I actually said it out loud to another person and I sort of felt a weight starting to lift off of me like it was okay to be a sinner as long as I said it with my mouth.

“And I know that these sins have eternally separated me from you. I repent of these sins, and believe that You, the Lord Jesus, died on the cross, and was buried, and rose again on the third day to forgive these sins.”

I said it, and all I could think about was Jesus having to die, and I wondered if he knew for sure that he'd be coming back or not and for a second I thought about how that might be a pretty scary thing but then I remembered that he was God and so there was no way that he didn't know and I felt a little better.

“I invite you, Jesus, to become Lord of my life, and to live in my heart forever.”

I knew that Jesus living in my heart was supposed to be a big deal and all, but for some reason I didn't really feel anything at the time. I didn't know what it would feel like for a dead guy or a spirit or whatever to live in your heart. In fact, I didn't know what it meant to have someone living in your heart, dead or alive – or both – but I figured that it was something that you sort of had to get used to, like how Luke didn't really know how to use the Force at first until Yoda really taught him and that's when I realized that maybe that's why I'd ended up living with PaPa, so that he could teach me what it was supposed to be like to have Jesus in your heart and how you actually turned that kind of power into a real thing that you could use to help other people and maybe even sometimes yourself.

When I was done with the prayer, PaPa hugged me again and we both stood up off the floor and he put one of his hands on my head and started rambling on in tongues and then he looked me right in the eyes and said,

“God's given me the vision, Goose. He's given me the visions that you will be his prophet. I saw the darkness move away from you like clouds and an Angel of the Lord descended upon you and touched your lips with burning coal. Not one of your words will ever fall to the ground.”

“I had a hot coal on my mouth?” I asked him. I hadn't felt anything but his sweaty old hand on me.

“He was purifying your tongue,” he said. “And forgiving your sins.”

I hadn't seen it myself but it seemed like a proper vision for a prophet, and even though I wasn't exactly sure what a prophet had to do, it seemed like a proper title and

something that maybe came with the sort of powers that I wanted so I believed him for the most part.

“Now we’ve got to get you filled with the Spirit.”

“I thought I just got the Spirit.”

“You’ve got it,” he said. “But you’ve got to get filled with it. Baptized with it. Slain with it. You’ll need the Spirit to speak the Word.”

“How do I get that?”

“You’ve got to give your public testimony, and there must be an impartation.”

I thought about what it would be like to go through all of this crazy stuff with other people around, and even though I wasn’t sure yet whether I wanted to see other people or them see me as a prophet and all, I sort of liked the idea of telling some people that I had Jesus in my heart and that’s when I thought of Henry.

“I want Henry to see that I got the Spirit,” I said.

PaPa smiled.

“I think we can have that arranged.”

Chapter 16

It turned out that Henry was staying right in Cimarron in this place called The Love House which is where they send slow people and crazy people and all sorts of rejects that didn't have parents or a place of their own. PaPa knew it all along but didn't tell me which pissed me off on account of the fact that I asked about Henry quite a bit and he didn't say anything but in the end it made sense because the government didn't want us seeing each other anyway. The judge told PaPa that we could see each other as long as we had some kind of supervision, which meant that we had to stay at the reject house or PaPa had to be there.

It was a Wednesday night and PaPa told me to put on my best clothes because we were going to go get Henry and go to church which sort of confused me because I didn't have any church clothes on account of PaPa saying that we weren't ever going to church on top of the fact that it was a little weird that church was on a Wednesday and not a Sunday, but I didn't mind all of the confusion because I was going to get to see Henry for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

The Love House wasn't anything but a big house that I'd seen about a thousand times right on Main Street across from the Co-op. PaPa parked his Cadillac out front and before I

could even get my door open Henry was on the front porch with his hands behind his back, wearing his best church clothes and looking like a pretty normal guy. All I wanted to do was run up and give him the biggest hug I'd ever given anyone on the planet but I also wanted to look sort of cool and wasn't sure about these Love House people yet so I played it down like it wasn't that big of a deal.

“Hey, Henry.”

Apparently Henry didn't want to look cool at all because he reached out and picked me up and I remembered how strong he was and how even though he was kind of slow and pretty much thought just like me, he was basically a grown up in terms of being big.

“Hey, Goose.”

He kissed me on the cheek which was definitely embarrassing but I was tired of trying to act cool so I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed him as hard as I could.

“You want to meet my PaPa?”

PaPa made his way up the front steps as slowly as possible with his cane and then switched his cane to his left hand and stuck out his right one for Henry to shake. Henry put me down and shook PaPa's hand and told him it was nice to meet him and that all of the workers at the Love House had told him that he was a real nice man and a respectable man and a man of God and that he was taking real good care of me.

“Well, I'm trying my best,” he said.

Henry took me inside and we went up the stairs and he showed me his room, which was pretty nice. It basically looked like a hotel room and there weren't anything hanging on the walls that were personal, but he had his box of bottle caps on the floor next to his bed, which was one of a couple twin beds in the room.

“You stay in here with someone else?” I asked.

“I got a roommate named Kevin that works at the Wal-Mart in Stillwater, but he’s kind of annoying. He works late so the van’s always bringing him back at midnight and he’s always got to wake me up and tell me some kind of stupid story about Wal-Mart. Last night he told me that they had a bunch of TV’s stolen out of the back while they were unloading them from the trucks.”

“Stolen? That isn’t a bad story.”

He sat down on the bed and sort of started picking at a scab on his hand.

“Well, you try living with him. With any of these people. They’re all pretty stupid or got something wrong with them. I was doing just fine on my own, you know?”

“At least you don’t have to deal with Kirby,” I said. “Does he ever come around?”

“No. He said he doesn’t want anything to do with me after what I did to Grandma - Grandma. My check pays for me to stay here and he gets what’s left over.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

Just then an old lady stopped in the doorway and pointed at me. She had curly red hair and her face was all shriveled up and her head sort of looked like a skull and she was wearing an OU sweatshirt that was so faded it was starting to look pink. For some reason she sort of looked like Mom except with color in her eyes and the meat in her face sucked out and she just stood there with her long, boney finger pointing at me.

“Do you know which door you entered?” she asked me.

“What?”

“Which door you entered. Do you know which door you entered?”

I didn't know what she was talking about and her boney finger was starting to freak me out a bit and when she started to come into the room I backed up so far that I just sort of fell in Henry's lap.

"Get out of here, Mary," Henry said. She stopped where she was but didn't stop pointing. "I said get out of here!" She backed up and went down the hallway. "That's just Mary," Henry said. "She asks everyone that. She's got something wrong in the head. It seems like a lot of folks here do."

"You said that."

"I guess it beats prison, which is probably where we should both be."

Downstairs was a lot bigger than I'd noticed when I came in. There was a big screen TV with Wheel of Fortune on it and a brick fireplace and all of these big, comfy looking chairs where all of who I guessed were Henry's new friends were sitting. The woman in the OU sweatshirt was down there and an older looking man with a gray beard who kept shouting "S" every time they spun the wheel even though there was clearly already an S on the board and another, younger boy that sort of looked like a girl and an ape at the same time. He was yelling letters, too, but I couldn't understand what he was saying, it just sounded like a bunch of grunts and animal noises. I tapped Henry on the shoulder and when he leaned down I whispered in his ear.

"What's wrong with him?"

"That's Jerry. He's got don syndrome."

"Does that mean he's going to die?"

"No"

"Can you catch it?"

He said no and I realized all of a sudden how stupid of a question it was on account of the fact that I saw someone with don syndrome on TV one time and Mom had explained to me that it was a sad thing and a sort of retardation and that was the first time that I really realized that Henry was sort of retarded like he had a syndrome. It didn't really change the way I thought of him, but until that point I'd only really ever thought of him as slow, which he basically is.

PaPa was standing between the brick fireplace and a set of light yellow curtains talking to a man that looked like he wasn't slow or crazy, which meant that he was probably the owner and I couldn't help but wonder to myself what type of person builds a big house and then lets a bunch of loons live in it. Maybe he wasn't that bad, though, because Henry was a nice guy and I'm sure if you could get past the rest of them talking funny and pointing their creepy fingers at you all of the time and generally not knowing how to play Wheel of Fortune, the rest of them were probably pretty nice, too. PaPa motioned for me to come over and so Henry and I went over there.

“This is Mr. McClusky,” PaPa said.

Mr. McClusky looked like he was almost as old as PaPa and had old man glasses to match. The only difference was that Mr. McClusky was as fat as they come and had this gray moustache that was starting to turn yellow and I could only imagine it was from smoking tons of cigarettes. I stuck out my hand and his nearly swallowed mine.

“Nice to meet you –”

“Goose.”

I couldn't tell if PaPa knew Mr. McClusky or not, but I could tell they were talking business about getting Henry checked out for the night so that we could go to church so I took the opportunity to pull Henry aside by the stairs and tell him the good news.

“Did you hear I got Jesus in my heart?”

He looked at me like I'd just told him that his grandma was back from the dead and was going to forgive us for basically killing her and trying to bury her illegally in what was pretty much a heathen ceremony.

“You mean you got saved?”

“Yeah I got saved. PaPa helped me the other night. Said the sinner's prayer and everything.”

For the second time that night he picked me up and held me in the air and when I looked down into his face I could see that he was crying and laughing at the same time just like PaPa had and I started wondering what it was with all these people with Jesus in their hearts and I wondered if I'd be able to cry and laugh at the same time if someone told me that *they* got Jesus in their heart now that I had him in *my* heart. Probably not. He started dancing around the room with me in his arms and telling everyone that I got Jesus which made me feel real good even though it was a little embarrassing and I wasn't completely sure that I wanted other people knowing who's living in my heart but I guess that's the way of the world when you're destined to be a prophet.

“This means – this means we get to go to heaven together!”

“Are we dying soon?”

He didn't think my joke was very funny or he didn't hear me because he just started hollering like he really was one of those retards and dancing around with me in the air and he

took me into the big room where all of the others were and stood in front of the TV and yelled at everyone and told them that I'd gotten Jesus in my heart. Jerry got up and started hollering too and he came over and put his arms around both of us like we'd all been family our whole life and the old guy with the moustache that kept yelling out "S" just yelled at us and told us to get out of the way and the old lady in the OU sweatshirt started crying and ran upstairs. I didn't know who any of these people were but I was glad that Henry and Jerry were so excited and I was starting to wonder why I hadn't gotten right with Jesus earlier and while Henry had me hoisted up in the air I sort of felt like a champion for a moment. He put me down and punched me in the arm.

"We're like brothers now," he said. "Brothers in the Spirit. I wondered why we were going to church. I didn't know you went to church."

"PaPa doesn't ever go and I don't know if we ever will but I got to go tonight so that I can get filled with the Spirit."

He looked pretty confused when I said that.

"What do you mean?"

"I got to get slain or whatever and filled with the Spirit so that I can be a prophet and have all the powers and everything that come with having the Holy Ghost in you. I got to learn to speak in tongues like the rest of you."

His look of confusion turned into a look of seriousness.

"You mean we're going to one of those churches – one of those churches that speaks in tongues?"

"Well don't they all?"

"I don't believe in that snake oil," he said.

“Snake oil? What does that even mean?”

“I don’t really know – Grandma used to say it. It means something’s made up. Those people that talk like that are just faking it. No one speaks in tongues anymore and there isn’t no prophets anymore. Grandma said churches like that are just scamming you for your money by telling you that you can heal sick people and speak in tongues to God and all that.”

Something happened right then even though I’m not sure what but Henry sort of looked different to me, darker, like someone I didn’t know, like he wasn’t Henry anymore. He was this other person that the government had put in Henry’s body while Henry was in a lab somewhere having his brain tested which got me to thinking that even though the government hadn’t done anything to *me* that maybe Mom was right after all about how they change the way people think.

“What do you mean it’s a scam? They’re Christians, aren’t they? What’s the difference between one Christian and another unless you’re Catholic, who you said weren’t Christians to begin with?”

He stood there thinking for a bit and I got to thinking about how pretty much all that mattered to me in the world was what Henry thought because for a good portion of my life he was the only decent guy I knew but all that was starting to change. Here I was, at some sort of crucial moment in my life when everything was starting to go right for the first time and I had gotten Jesus in my heart and was about to be a prophet – about to be *somebody* – and Henry was trying to make me feel like PaPa was just scamming me. Which he would have to be the one doing the scamming on account of the fact that he was a preacher himself at the church we were going to.

“It’s just not right – not right.”

He was starting to get a little louder and the Wheel of Fortune crowd had turned around and they were watching and I was pretty embarrassed and feeling pretty weird about how Henry was getting all high and mighty all of a sudden which was weird because basically I was doing a good thing and something I thought he’d of wanted me to do. PaPa and Mr. McClusky had noticed that Henry was getting upset and they both came over and Mr. McClusky asked Henry what the matter was.

“Goose is going to one of those freak-show churches where they speak in tongues and do those crazy dances and pretend to heal sick people.”

When he said that PaPa’s eyes got about as big as billiard balls and he squeezed so tight on his cane that all his knuckles turned white and his hand started to shake a bit and I could tell he wanted to hit Henry over the head with his cane.

“There’s nothing crazy or freaky about the Holy Ghost,” he said. Mr. McClusky put his hand on PaPa’s shoulder like he was trying to calm him down. “Nothing crazy about the Holy Ghost at all,” PaPa said again. “And you’ll see what comes to you when you blaspheme the Holy Ghost, son.”

I wasn’t sure I liked the way that PaPa was talking to Henry but at the same time I wasn’t even real sure it was Henry anymore anyway and not some government pod experiment and on top of that PaPa was a retired preacher and maybe Henry needed to hear what he had to say.

“Just come on with us to the church,” I said. “See what it’s like. I haven’t ever been neither. Maybe it’s not what you think.”

“I’m not going to no crazy church,” he said but really yelled. By then the woman in the OU shirt was back again, facing the wall, rocking back and forth and everything was making me a little nervous and on top of all of that I was now faced with the prospect of getting filled with the Spirit in some church I’d never been to without the only real friend I had in the world but I couldn’t get my thoughts straight with that lady crying and PaPa beating his cane on the floor and Henry yelling about how I had to be careful or I’d lose my way.

“Well I don’t want you there anyway,” I said. “All you done since I got here is complain about these people and piss on my big day and –” I couldn’t think of what else to say so I just turned around and started to storm out but before I could get to the door the weird lady in the OU sweatshirt turned around and bent over and put her finger in my face and for some reason her face looked a hundred times creepier than the first time I’d seen her and I could see the outline of her skull and her eyes were sunk back in her head and she asked me what door I went through. I tried to turn back around to PaPa but when I did she grabbed me by the shoulders and put her lips up next to my ear and whispered,

“Kill him.”

A jolt went through my body and I ripped myself away from her and ran to PaPa and wrapped my arms around him and when I looked back up at her she was just facing the wall again, slowly rocking.

I didn’t even say goodbye to Henry. Me and PaPa got out of there as fast as we could and as we got into the Cadillac I kept thinking about how scary that place was and how even though it had a nice sounding name like The Love House it had Henry acting all sad and crazy and it was making him not my friend anymore which basically hurt way more than

Mom kicking me out or Dad not wanting me around anymore and I determined right then that the first thing I would do after I got filled with the Spirit or whatever was to use my new powers to spring Henry out of that joint and get his head straight. And I knew we wouldn't end up in jail or nothing this time because I'd have Jesus and the Holy Ghost on my side because I was a prophet and my lips had been burned by that coal in PaPa's vision which meant I wasn't a sinner anymore.

Despite the fact that I was freaked out by all the weirdness in that place and the fact that Henry didn't really believe that I was a prophet and I was pretty sad that I'd left without saying goodbye, I was more determined than ever to go to that church and get filled up with whatever I needed to make things right again.

Chapter 17

The church was a small, brick building with a big, white cross on the front that was taller than the building and leaning forward like it was going to fall off and one of them lit-up signs that said “WELL OF LIFE PENTACOSTAL CHURCH OF GOD, GOD LOVES THE UNBORN, TOO, SERVICES: 10:30, GET THE SPRIT” even though I was pretty sure it meant to say “SPIRIT” and because of that I felt like maybe they’d put that sign up just for me since that was what I was there to do but then PaPa told me that the sign had been up there since he was pastor and the cross was straighter than, too, and that’s when it really hit me that everything was new to me but different for PaPa, too.

The same was pretty much true for the inside. You could tell because PaPa turned white like he was dead – and I know because I’ve seen a dead person – and he even put his hand on his heart like he was having a heart attack. There weren’t pews or anything you’d expect to sit in at a church but all these brown folding chairs lined up like they were supposed to be pews. Everyone was putting their Bibles in their folding chairs like as placeholders or something and milling around talking to each other like they’d just run into each other for the first time in ten years. I saw a guy that didn’t have any legs in a

wheelchair hugging this fat lady with tons of makeup and about fifteen kids and I was thinking it was pretty weird at this church and then I saw this guy wearing a pretty sweet leather jacket like he might be a biker and when he turned away from me there was a giant patch on the back of the jacket with a flaming sword and an open book and it said “Bikers for Christ” and then I was thinking maybe it wasn’t as bad after all and maybe there were some guys that had seen some weird stuff like me.

And then I saw Ms. Bumpass. My first instinct was to hide on account of the fact that she knew I’d been skipping school and then saw me at the casino so I stepped behind PaPa real quick even though I was almost as tall as him. It’s not like I was afraid she was going to report me and the government’d take me. That’d already happened. For some reason I just felt a little weird about her knowing I did those things and me being there to get the Spirit and all. Maybe she’d be staring at me whenever I did whatever it was that you did to get filled up and all she’d be thinking was *that boy skips schools and hangs out with gamblers*. Maybe the Holy Ghost would hear her and he wouldn’t finish the deal.

She saw me anyway and when she looked at me I could tell by the way she breathed in really quickly and looked away that she was just as weird about the situation and that’s when I realized that she probably didn’t want people knowing *she* was at the casino just as much as *I* didn’t want them to know and for some reason I knew then that our secrets were basically safe.

The funny thing, though, was that it turned out she wasn’t even looking at me, she was looking at PaPa and all of a sudden it occurred to me that PaPa was the one that probably didn’t belong there, not me. Ms. Bumpass pointed at PaPa and said something and before we’d even found our seats the whole room was looking at us and talking about us. There was

all these fake trees with Christmas lights – not the good kind, but the boring white ones – on them surrounding the room and between those flashy lights and all the well-dressed people looking and pointing at us it sort of felt like we were famous and walking down the red carpet some fancy awards show. Although I could tell PaPa felt differently on account of the fact that he looked like a dead man again.

“Albert Leon, we’re so glad you could make it this morning.”

It took me a while to take my attention off of my red carpet thoughts but when I got a hold of myself I realized that someone was shaking PaPa’s hand like PaPa was hiding gold coins inside his jacket.

“Hello, Reverend Corey,” PaPa said. He sounded half sarcastic and half genuine but I don’t know why. “I’d like you to meet my grandson, Albert.”

“Call me Goose,” I said. “I hate that name.”

The reverend laughed.

“But your grandfather has a wonderful name.”

PaPa turned the other way.

Before I knew it, Reverend Corey had my hand in his own and he was patting it with the other hand like I was a baby or a lady in a medieval story, which annoyed me on account of my actual age and sort of hurt me on account of the fact that he was wearing these big silver rings with different colored stones on all his fingers. They were all red and brown and orange and reminded me of this little collection of polished rocks that Mom got me when she got to go to the dunes and ride buggies with a guy that took her out a couple times when she was clean but quit showing up when she got back on the meth. The reverend was this real fat guy with dark hair that was slicked back and I could tell right away by his fancy suit that was

shimmery and black and striped that he was one of those guys that's way into looks and material possessions and all that jazz. Which seemed strange, because he was a reverend, but I guess in the end that everyone's got their style unless they can't afford one.

Despite the fact that he seemed a little suspicious and PaPa didn't seem to be totally into him I wanted to make a good impression since I was there to get filled with the Spirit and so I let him smash my hand and tried to make some conversation.

"I'm here because I got Jesus in my heart the other day," I said.

He smiled and smashed a little harder.

"There's no better news than the good news, is there?"

My hand was starting to hurt even though I didn't think he knew he was doing it so I pulled my hand away and put it in PaPa's. PaPa squeezed it, which actually felt good because he didn't have a bunch of metal on his hand and he smiled and nodded at the reverend and we went to find chairs on the back row, which was the only place PaPa would sit. When we found a couple of chairs that weren't directly next to other people we sat down.

"Look at all this damned *progress*," PaPa said, which surprised me since you aren't supposed to cuss in church. He motioned towards the front of the room where there was like a complete rock band warming up on the stage with drums and an electric guitar and everything and there was even this screen where the band put their graphics which was basically just a picture of a wooden cross with blood all over it and lightning flashing in the background which seemed sort of scary and violent for a place like church but was till pretty sweet for a rock band.

"What's wrong with that? I bet they play good music. Listen to them – that sounds pretty good."

Even though part of me was into the music the other part of me thought it sounded pretty cheesy like something a kid would listen to but I wanted to make PaPa feel better about everything seeing as he seemed to be upset about how the church basically wasn't his anymore. The guy playing the guitar stopped in the middle of a riff that was turning out to actually be pretty wicked and laughed and did this silly dance and PaPa rolled his eyes.

“They're making a mockery of themselves.”

I didn't really know what he was talking about and I was pretty excited to see the band play their whole songs because even though they were cheesy they might have some interesting stuff, even though I was starting to get really nervous about getting filled up with the Spirit and what that was going to take, but I didn't like the idea of him not wanting to be there so I told him we could leave if he wanted to.

“No.”

“But we can do this at home,” I said. “What do we need all of these people for? This is just a building and you got the Spirit at home. You pretty much got the Spirit wherever you go, right?”

He looked at me for a while with his eyes squinting behind his glasses like maybe I'd said something that was really true even though I'd just pretty much pulled it out of nowhere and was just trying to make him happy but then he just said no again.

“When believers gather, there is always an impartation of the Spirit.” He leaned back in his folding chair and put one of his legs over the other one and his pant leg rode up and I could see he had on turquoise socks and I could see his white old veiny leg. He put both of his hands flat out in the air and made it turn back and forth like it was an airplane. “It's like the Holy Ghost comes down and hovers over this place like a dove. And when the right

moment comes, when the Spirit is ready and the body is willing, the Spirit descends down on this place and imparts itself into the believers. The Spirit's got to be flowing for you to get your fill."

I didn't know what he meant about all the imparts and stuff but I got the dove thing pretty much and that's when I think I asked him the first real question since I got Jesus in my heart.

"Does it ever leave you once you got it?"

He flew his plane over my head and messed my hair.

"No."

I liked the sound of something that wouldn't ever leave you.

About that time Reverend Corey got up at the pulpit and picked up the microphone and started yelling at us all.

"Are you ready for the presence of God?"

The whole congregation started clapping and waving their hands and shouting "AMEN" at the top of their lungs and that's when I knew I was going to see some pretty wicked stuff. Like the sort of stuff that you always know is real and true and possibly scary but no one ever talks about because they got their own problems.

This giant cowboy with a hat and boots and starched Wranglers and everything gets up on the stage with the reverend and starts clapping his hands with the music and gets his own microphone and it's pretty obvious that he's the lead singer and despite the fact that I thought the band was going to be pretty cool I realized it might actually end up being pretty stupid on account of it probably being country music because of the cowboy and I hate country music. I'm more into heavy metal like Dad is, even though I don't really know the

names of any of the bands or songs seeing as I never really owned any CD's or a CD player and mostly heard stuff on the radio or when other people played it.

“Are you ready to light the fire in your heart?” the big cowboy asks and some people clap and others say “Amen” and the rest do both. It turned out it was sort of country and even though I thought it was pretty hokey I tried to join in because I knew if I was going to get filled up with the Spirit that I had to get in that sort of mood which meant doing all the things that everyone else was doing. They all seemed to have the Spirit pretty good because they were all raising their hands up during the music and swaying their hands and closing their eyes which didn't seem like a good idea on account of all the words being up on the big screen up front. I just sang and didn't do any of that other stuff but when I looked over at PaPa to see if it was a good idea he wasn't singing, which seemed strange since he was pretty into the Spirit and everything when we were at home and alone.

After singing what felt like about five thousand songs about riding on horses with Jesus and fighting the enemy with Jesus and having your heart filled with Jesus the big cowboy bowed his head and started praying but I couldn't understand a word he was saying because all of his backup singers just kept saying “Thank you, Jesus” into their microphones which seemed a little silly on account of the fact that that's basically what we'd just spent the last forty-five minutes doing.

When the prayer ended we all looked up and the bloody cross was back up on the screen except this time the words “PRAISE THE LORD” were written real big right across the middle and it was like everyone knew what was their cue to start acting crazy because all at once everyone started whooping and hollering and yelling in tongues and waving their arms and this one guy that looked like he was wearing a pretty expensive suit was yelling so

loud that his face was turning red and he was shaking his fists like some demon had possessed him and he was trying to fight it off. I wondered if that was what it was going to be like to get filled up with the Holy Ghost – being possessed – and even though I wasn't entirely sure what it felt like to be possessed I decided it was good and hoped that I wouldn't fight it like the guy in the ritzy jacket.

The big cowboy started humming into the microphone and babbling on about how we were in the presence of God and he started asking God to sanctify us – which I guess means to possess us – and then I couldn't tell what he was saying because he just started mumbling in tongues in a real low voice like he was telling a secret only into a microphone so that everyone could hear and it wasn't a secret anymore. About that time one of the women sitting next to Mrs. Bumpass got up out of her seat and started running in a circle around everyone. After a couple of laps she reached under a small table in the back and pulled out all these different colored scarves that were tied together like I saw on a magic show on TV once and she started trailing the scarves behind her when she ran around the room and did some sort of dance that looked pretty weird since there wasn't any music anyways but everyone seemed to be pretty into it so I tried to get into it, too.

I raised my hands up like the guy without any legs was doing and I closed my eyes which made things pretty confusing since I couldn't see what everyone else was doing to copy and I tilted my head back and tried my hardest to come up with something to say to God but I couldn't think of anything. I wanted pretty badly to be one of them and talk crazy like that because it would've meant that I was ready to be a prophet and to start my work in saving my family and then who knows, maybe the whole town, but more than anything I

basically wanted to do what they were doing because it meant I could be a part of the group. And everyone wants to be a part of a group.

Everyone went on like that for maybe ten or fifteen minutes and then the reverend climbed the stairs to the stage and held his hands out like he wanted everyone to get quiet, which they did, and then he gave a pretty fiery sermon. He said that it was a special year – an important year when important people were going to do important things and that pretty much got my ears perked up because I was ready to be one of those important people.

He was pretty much screaming the whole sermon and every few minutes he'd pull this bright pink scarf out of his back pocket and dab the sweat off of his forehead and I couldn't help but wonder if maybe he'd borrowed it from the dancing scarf lady before the service. He went on to say that there was a fierce battle going on that was a serious matter and that it was between the forces of light and dark. It wasn't a new war, he said. The stage was set when Satan fell like lightning and the battle lines were drawn. I liked that part a lot because it pretty much summed up everything I'd learned reading in *Star Wars* over the months – the bad guys might have taken over almost the whole universe, but there'd always be a fight as long as good people like Luke Skywalker did what was right. Or me, maybe.

It kind of bummed me out, though, that the battle had been going on for so long on account of the fact that maybe my role wouldn't be that significant after all. I mean, does anyone really remember who fought Satan like a hundred thousand years ago. I didn't, but that might've just been because I'd only started to learn about God and the Bible pretty recently. But then Reverend Corey pretty much convinced me: he said that the battle was intensifying because the coming of the Lord is growing nigh. He said he gets up every

morning and looks to the east in anticipation. I wasn't quite sure why he looked to the east but the important thing was that he was anticipating.

“Do you know what good believers lack?” he said. “Identity.” Everyone was starting to get pretty riled up and it didn't matter what he said they were yelling “Amen” at everything and pumping their fists in the air like it was the big game and we were down at the last minute. “Don't blend in,” he said. “Don't hide. Don't look like the rest of them. Or when you step up to the plate to do God's work, Satan's going to look you right in the eye and say, *Who are you?*” I knew who I was. I was a prophet, just like PaPa said, and when I looked at PaPa, it was like he knew what I was thinking and he nodded his head and put his hand over his heart and said “Amen,” which was basically the first thing he'd said the whole service. “Tell the devil to stand off,” Reverend Corey said, only at this point he was screaming at the top of his lungs. He pointed the microphone out at the audience and put one hand behind his ear like he was waiting for us to tell the devil off. People started screaming different things. Mrs. Bumpass yelled out and told the devil to let go of her finances. The guy in the leather vest yelled and told him to let go of his son and his addiction. Everyone started yelling so I yelled, too.

“Let go of my family, Satan!”

The guy in the leather jacket turned around and smiled at me and gave me this like *right on* motion with his fist.

“Say it in the Spirit,” the reverend shouted and everyone started shouting in tongues and I sort of wanted to do it again but wasn't sure if I'd sound stupid or if someone would think I was a fraud, which a tiny part of me always thinks I am myself. “Say it in the Sprit,”

he said again. “Because if you don’t have the Holy Ghost, you better not square off with the devil.”

I knew right then more than ever that I had to get the Spirit. I had to have the Spirit if I wanted any kind of identity. I needed to get an identity like Luke Skywalker became a Jedi. He was the only one in the whole universe that could make things right – and so whatever he did he knew he was going to be okay and he didn’t have to worry because he had a mission. And when I looked around I knew that all those people hated the devil, too, and could help me fight the devil when it was my time. I just wondered if any of them knew that the devil was a woman and that she had hooves for feet and that she was right there in Cimarron, hunting me down, on account of the fact that she knew about my destiny and all that.

I was as nervous as I’d ever been in my life on account of having to go up there and take part in what I could tell was going to be a pretty serious religious ceremony. It reminded me of that time I had to dress up like Magellan in school and get up in front of the whole class and talk about what kind of exploring I did back in the Spanish days. My stomach felt like it was dragging on the floor. I elbowed PaPa in the arm and leaned in so he could hear me.

“What am I supposed to do when I get filled with the Spirit?”

He put his arm around me sort of like he was hugging me from the side, which made me feel a little better.

“You aren’t supposed to do anything,” he said. “Just let the Spirit take hold of you. When it’s time for you to speak just open your mouth and don’t worry about what it is that you’ll say – God’ll say it for you.”

That didn't make me feel much better and when he took his arm away I sort of leaned in because I didn't want him letting me go but he just stood there smiling and I could feel my own heartbeat in my neck. Around that time the band got back up on stage and started playing this sort of slow music that was basically just the drums and the piano and the reverend got down off the stage and wiped his face off again with his scarf and got this serious look on his face like everything he had said up to that point was just a joke and what he was about to say was the most important thing he'd ever said to another person.

"Now, this is the time we reserve for prayers and intercession," he said. "If you feel like the devil has got hold of you and you need to reclaim your identity, come forward and let us share in your burdens. Maybe you don't know Jesus Christ as your personal savior and you'd like to get him into your heart. Come on down and we can take care of that. Whatever your burdens, come lay them at the altar of God." He motioned to the floor in front of him. PaPa looked at me and nodded like it that was my time but I just stood there, frozen, like when you shine your flashlight in a raccoon's eyes and they look like marbles that are on fire. I knew I had to go – I knew this was my chance and that if I was ever going to be any kind of man of God that I had to have the courage to go up there to the altar on the floor – but it felt like some kind of force field was keeping me in place and not letting me move and the longer I stood there the tighter the knot got in my stomach.

No one else was going forward, either, and the reverend just stood there waiting for a while and the band kept playing and all I wanted to do was turn around and run out the door and all the way back to PaPa's house but whatever had taken hold of me wouldn't let me do that either.

“The Holy Spirit has spoken to me,” the reverend said. “He’s told me that there is someone here, in this room, that needs God. I don’t know why – I don’t know if someone needs to get saved or if someone needs to confess – but the Spirit has pressed it upon me that we not leave this place until the work of God is complete.”

That made me feel even worse because I knew he was talking about me, which meant that the whole lot of us were going to be standing there in that room, listening to the band play the same sad song over and over again until I could figure out what to do. PaPa nudged me and I was about to take a step forward just out of pure shame when Ms. Bumpass across the aisle broke out in tears and walked up front with her arms up in the air and the tears coming down her face. The man in the leather vest followed her up there and as soon as she got up front she got down on her knees and the Biker for Christ guy got down on his knees, too, and they started praying together.

“Yes, Lord! Thank you Lord!” the reverend said.

It seemed a little weird to me that he would be so happy about Ms. Bumpass crying her eyes out because it looked pretty sad and pathetic to me and I couldn’t help but wonder why she was crying because, after all, her secret was safe with me and I wasn’t going to tell anyone there that she was a gambler and a smoker and all of that. I realized then, though, that it wasn’t about secrets. It couldn’t be about secrets anymore. I wasn’t going to lie about where Mom or Dad were to protect them or about how I’d seen the Deer Woman even though people might think that I was crazy and how I was basically scared out of my mind all of the time. Now that I was doing the right thing – now that I had a mission like the Jedis and the Rebels and a clear enemy that I knew I had to beat – I didn’t have to hide anything on account of God and the Spirit and PaPa and the reverend and Jesus all being on my side.

When I looked at it that way, Ms. Bumpass didn't seem as pathetic and I sort of thought she looked brave so I tried my best to be that way, too, and started walking down the aisle.

On the way up front, I paid close attention to what was going on in case I needed to know what to do. The guy in the leather vest helped Ms. Bumpass get up off of the floor and as soon as she was standing, the reverend walked up to her and put his hand on her head and can you believe it as soon as he touched her, her whole body went limp and she fell to the floor like she was nothing but a sack of flour and I wondered if they were going to do the same with me. When I got up to the altar, Reverend Corey himself came up to me and sort of grabbed my face with his hands.

“Why has the Lord brought you here today, child?”

I didn't like him calling me a child but I let it slide.

“I got Jesus in my heart but I need to get filled with the Spirit, too.”

“The prodigal has returned!”

He took a step back and looked around the room and motioned to a couple of people that I couldn't see to come forward and before I knew, the Biker for Christ guy and Ms. Bumpass and the big cowboy and the guy in the expensive suit were all surrounding me and they all had their hands on my shoulders and head which felt surprisingly heavy and I couldn't tell the difference between my heart and my stomach anymore but I was basically glad to have so many people interested in my spiritual business. The Reverend threw back his head and looked up at the ceiling and started asking God to anoint me and then he started saying the same thing over and over again which I'll never forget.

“Calla monga porney fontiga! Calla monga porney fontiga!”

He said it over and over again and I could hear the congregation getting pretty riled up behind me and when I looked up at the reverend his fat face was all red and he was dripping sweat and spitting on me every time he repeated that phrase and his hot breath was breathing down on me and when he shouted out I could hear his teeth chattering and for a second I wondered what I got myself into. Then all the people around me took their hands off of me and I tried to let the Spirit take hold of me even though I didn't know what that was supposed to feel like but before I could really get my bearings the reverend charged at me like a book and whacked me right in the forehead. It was pretty forceful so I staggered back a bit but I stayed up and when I did that everyone just sort of looked at me. He grabbed my face again and then pressed one of his hands real hard on my forehead and it felt like it was on fire and I could feel his pulse through his palm.

“Calla monga porney fontiga!”

He whacked me on the head again and that time I took the hint and fell backwards like Ms. Bumpass did and even though I could of caught myself I decided to go with it on account of PaPa said that's what you do with the Spirit – let it take hold of you. When I hit the ground everything got quiet and still for a moment and I looked up at the ceiling and saw the dome where the stars and the sun and the night and the day were supposed to be but they weren't there – it was just painted over white and while everyone above me was yelling and praying and shaking I closed my eyes.

I was back at the house on Garden Street only Dad was there and PaPa and Henry. Dad's motorcycle was parked out front and he and Mom were both laughing and Dad had a sponge and Mom had a hose and they were washing the motorcycle and PaPa was sitting in a

lawn chair and Henry was like at his feet learning all the mysteries of the universe and for a second everyone was happy or at least not on drugs and messed up and hating each other.

“I’m doing this for you,” I told them as I shook my limbs and tried to get the Holy Ghost and they all just looked at me and smiled and Dad gave me a thumbs up. “I’m doing this for you because it will save you.”

When I opened my eyes everyone was staring down at me and not saying a word, including PaPa, and even the rock band had quit playing and I stood there and looked back and forth between PaPa and Reverend Corey and they had this look on their faces like they were waiting on me to speak and I knew right then that I better say something good because they were going to be the first words I ever said as a prophet only I didn’t really know how to speak in tongues yet so I said the first thing that came into my head.

“Wookie.”

Ms. Bumpass gasped and fell over on the floor again.

“Wookie, wookie, wookie.”

“Praise the Lord,” the reverend said and when he said that and PaPa smiled I knew it must’ve been God talking and not me and the words just started tumbling out of me like when you pour ice out of the bag into a cooler.

“Wookie callie talkie mooney.”

Everyone clapped and I started saying a few more words then their clapping got organized and I realized that the music was playing again and that things were pretty much wrapped up.

“Look what the Spirit has done,” Reverend Corey said into the microphone.

“Another soul filled up to the brim with the Spirit.”

Everyone came by and gave me a hug and we were there for almost a half an hour talking to everyone and I was pretty excited about getting filled with the Spirit but what made me feel even better was that PaPa was smiling and talking to everyone there and they were all congratulating him and patting him on the back and telling him what a good looking boy I was and even Reverend Corey told him he was happy for him and asked him to come back and preach sometime even though PaPa said no.

I didn't know how I was supposed to feel or if I was supposed to feel different but for a moment it didn't matter because I was a new person and ready to get to work even if I wasn't sure about what I was specifically supposed to be doing.

I thought we were going to go straight home after church but instead PaPa took me to this Mexican restaurant on Main Street called Madre's which was a sign that he was in a real good mood because we never went out to eat and I was too because it was pretty much the first day of my new life and on top of that I hadn't been to a restaurant since I ran out on Mom and hid at Sachel's Diner. A bunch of people from the service were there, too, and they were all sitting together at a bunch of tables that had been pushed together and they were real glad to see us and asked us if we wanted to sit with them which I'd of been glad to since they were sort of my new family but PaPa said no and we sat alone in the back under a light that was shaped like a sombrero or whatever those hats are called that they wear in Mexico. As soon as the chips and salsa came I started stuffing my face even though I wasn't that hungry on account of all the excitement. I guess when you've been without food for a long time in your life you take every opportunity to eat as much as you can.

“Be careful, now,” PaPa said. “You don’t want to get full on those chips before your food comes.”

He was all smiles, though, and I could tell that he didn’t really care if I got full or not so I kept eating until the whole basket was empty. I had some questions about what had just happened and I thought it was probably a good time to ask since PaPa was so happy and feeling good and not in one of his sort of darker moods where all he does is mumble in tongues and yell at you when you ask him too many questions.

“What’s a prodigal?” I asked him. I wasn’t entirely sure but I guessed it was like the group’s nickname for new people like the Army called people grunts and the police called people rookies. At least that’s the way they make it look on TV.

“The prodigal son is the son that has returned home after being away for a long time, living a wretched life.”

He launched into this whole story about this old farmer that had given both his sons all his money which didn’t make much sense to me and one son saved all his money up and stayed on the farm and the other son went to the city and got drunk and gambled everything away. That pretty much sounded like me since I’d been hanging around the casino and drug dealers and people and places that church folks would consider the scum of the earth. Eventually the son that spent all the money came back and everyone threw him a party which sounded pretty sweet.

“Why’d he come back?”

“Because he knew he’d have it better as his father’s servant than as a slave to the world.”

That sounded like a pretty lame excuse to me because I figured anyone that was into gambling and drinking would really just be coming back to get a loan or steal something so that he could keep gambling and drinking but then I remembered that he was talking about me, and it made a bit more sense.

We ate our chimichangas and PaPa started going on and on about how much work we had to do and how I needed to start studying the Bible and learning it and getting ready to do God's work in this world and I could tell he was pretty excited about it but it all sounded sort of stressful to me. Don't get me wrong – I was ready as ever to get to doing God's work and being a prophet and all that – but I wasn't sure about all of the specifics that that entailed and I was kind of hoping that the Spirit was going to do all the work and not me. That's what PaPa said to begin with, after all. Just give into the Spirit. He'll do the work.

I was completely stuffed and was ready to go home and maybe take a nap or finally finish *Return of the Jedi* so I was glad when PaPa finally quit talking and paid the bill and we crawled up in his Cadillac and headed home. Cruising down 33, I sort of went into a daze because I was so full and the inside of the car was so hot and the armrest was kind of burning me and all I could do was stare out at the blue sky which didn't have any clouds in it and think about how lucky I was to be on this new track in life and ready to do good. Sure, I'd had run-ins with Dad and the government and the Deer Woman, who I was really starting to decide wasn't no Deer Woman but the devil himself – but things were basically fine now and I was going to get the chance to undo all the stupid things I'd done and make things right with my family.

PaPa turned onto the gravel road that led up to our house when I saw someone on the porch, pacing back and forth and talking to themselves and acting sort of crazy. When we got

closer I could see who it was and I got his feeling that my path really was set and that God had set everything in motion for me to like be a prophet and a savior and a hero and all that. It was Mom, and it was like God had set her right down in my path and everything was starting to make real sense for the first time in my life.

Chapter 18

Before I could even get my hand to the door handle Mom had swung the door open and unbuckled me and hugged me so hard that we fell over on the gravel which should of hurt pretty bad on account of PaPa having new gravel laid not too long before that but I was so freaked out by what has happening I didn't even notice I was bleeding. She was just crying and kissing my face.

“I'm clean, baby. I'm clean.”

She smelled like BO and piss and was wearing the same jeans and “TGIF” t-shirt she'd been wearing when I last saw her. I had to look real hard at her for a while on account of the fact that even though I knew perfectly well it was Mom and she was even wearing the same clothes and everything, it'd been so long since I'd seen her that I just had to stare. She stopped kissing me and wiped the tears off of her face and I noticed that her eyes were green, which was a good thing.

“What's the matter, Goose? Aren't you happy to see me?”

For some reason I just kept on staring at her and trying my hardest to feel something like happy that Mom came back for me or excited that God had dropped her right down in

my life or pissed off because she basically kicked me out and started what were some of the worst months of my life or happy that she had done that because if it weren't for that I wouldn't ever of gotten Jesus in my heart. All of those things were spinning by like on the wheel on *Wheel of Fortune* and I just kept staring at her, worried I was going to land on "BANKRUPT."

I didn't get a chance to say anything, though, because before I knew it PaPa was pulling Mom off of me which looked pretty strange on account of him almost being shorter than her and basically being an old man.

"What did you do to him?" she screamed at PaPa. Her back was sort of twisted up and she was waving her hands all crazy like and when she swung and stumbled around a cloud of dirt was following from all the gravel she kicked up. "What the fuck did you do to him?"

Then, as if things weren't crazy enough, she just quit screaming and pointing at PaPa and started bawling her head off worse than even Henry cries – and he's a pretty big crybaby – and she fell over on top of PaPa who had to brace himself with his cane and she just sort of alternated between sobbing and whimpering and bawling while he just stood there with one hand on his cane and the other at his side.

When I got up I noticed that one of my hands was bleeding and on top of that I'd gotten blood on my new jeans, which I assumed PaPa was not going to be happy about. I brushed off and straightened my hair which I noticed was starting to get pretty long and I realized that I was basically a different person than when Mom last saw me. I'd cooked meth with Dad and basically killed a woman and stolen her son's money and became best friends with that son and illegally buried her body and made my own rules for me like not stealing at

least from friends and I'd gotten Jesus in my heart and become a prophet and on top of that my hair had gotten long and I had on some new clothes. Really, when I thought about it, it was weird that Mom still looked exactly the same except for her eyes and I felt sorry for her. I felt sorry for her and made myself get excited again about being the one that was going to save her.

I jumped on her and hugged her as hard as I could and she let go of PaPa and stopped howling and I told her I missed her and loved her and was sorry about how I'd stabbed Curly T and I didn't mean to be a problem and then even I started crying which was pretty weird because I'm not a big crier and on top of that I wanted PaPa to think I was a real man of God that didn't get choked up so easily. Right then, though, I decided I didn't care and I cried out everything I had been meaning to cry out over the last few months but just never really got the opportunity to cry out. I looked at PaPa and he rolled his eyes and then went inside and closed the door behind him.

Mom pulled me down and we both sat with our legs crossed in the grass and she took me by the face and told me she was sorry for everything but she was crying and blowing snot out of her nose and acting kind of tweaked out even though her eyes weren't blacked out and so it was pretty hard to understand everything she was saying.

"I knew I shouldn't let Curly T beat you up like he did and I didn't want you to go but I had to tell you to because I knew he'd hurt you for sure. And there wasn't any way I could come after you."

I felt the pissed off side in me flare up a little bit.

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't understand, honey."

“Why not?”

“Because you’re just a kid, Goose.”

“No, why couldn’t you come after me?” Until the words came out of my mouth, I’d never even thought about the possibility of Mom trying to save *me*. The kid remark made me burn a bit, too, but I thought I’d let it slide on account of there being more important things to talk about. I didn’t like her avoiding the subject so I stood up so I’d be taller than her and asked her again only I tried to not sound like a kid so she would tell me and I think it worked because she looked terrified.

“Well, Curly T was helping out with things.” She looked down at her lap and fished into the grass with a twig she was holding. “He said he was going to get me a place, and he was getting me my stuff, and he said he loved me.”

I wasn’t sure what to say since all those things basically sounded pretty good but I couldn’t help but wonder why if Curly T was such a great guy and if he was going to get Mom a whole new life why she’d still be a tweaker in that new life and why at least couldn’t I be there and be a part of it since that was pretty much all I wanted to begin with. I tried to remind myself that if none of this had happened that I wouldn’t ever of foundout PaPa was alive and wouldn’t’ve been able to fulfill my spiritual destiny and all that. I thought about asking her why she’d told me PaPa was dead but she was crying pretty bad and I thought maybe I’d been mean enough already. After all I was pretty glad to see her.

“But I’m clean now,” she said. “I’m clean.”

I didn’t know how long that would last so I knew I didn’t have very long to figure what it was I was supposed to do to get her saved once and for all and to start making things right. I might not of known what to do, but like Reverend Corey said, it doesn’t matter if you

know where you're going, you got to just take a step in whatever direction you can: that's faith.

We went inside and PaPa was in the kitchen for some reason, fixing some biscuits, even though we'd both just eaten so much I wanted to puke. He usually cooked biscuits from scratch but right then he was standing over the stove fussing with one of those tubes of biscuits that had been sitting in his fridge ever since I got there. Mom walked up behind him like she was sneaking and put her hand out like she was going to grab him by the shoulder but her hand just sort of hovered there like you had to do when you wanted to pet Moses. You never knew when she was going to be nice and lick you or try to bite your whole arm off. PaPa ripped the paper off of the roll of biscuits and before Mom could get a chance to touch them the roll exploded like there was a gun in the house and Mom screamed at the top of her lungs and tripped over one of the chairs when she stepped backwards and went to the floor with it. She started whimpering, which seemed sort of weird on account of the fact that it was just a can of biscuits but then again when you lived like me and Mom sometimes the stupidest things remind you of the scariest things.

“What are you doing here?”

He didn't even look at Mom when he asked her the question – he just started slamming the dough down on a cookie sheet and muttering stuff under his breath that I couldn't really understand but could tell wasn't exactly the tongues he usually spoke in when he muttered under his breath like that. Mom didn't answer him – she just sat there on the floor and kept whimpering and rocking back and forth like she did when she was all tweaked out – and finally PaPa put the last biscuit on the sheet and slammed his fist down on it which seemed like a complete waste of a perfectly good biscuit, even if it did come out of the can.

“Did you come back to steal your son?”

The thought had never occurred to me that she'd want me to leave PaPa and when I really thought about it I didn't want to do that and hoped it didn't come to that even though I wanted Mom to be okay and do whatever it was she had to do, especially in light of the fact that PaPa didn't seem to like her very much. Never really did.

“I'm gonna get clean,” she said. “I swear. I'll do it right and keep going to the meetings this time and go to church and do whatever you want.”

“We don't go to church,” I said. “Well, we did today on account of –”

PaPa shot me a look that said to shut up or go to hell. Mom got up off the floor and acted real cool and calm again and she put her hands out in front of her and took on this real reasonable tone like PaPa might've had a gun in his pocket and he might've pulled it out at any second and blown Mom away. I didn't know why she was acting like that – PaPa had his crazy side but there was no way he would ever blow someone away like that. I didn't even know if he had a gun. She kept moving towards him slowly and finally she reached out and put her hand on his shoulder and then – still moving real slowly – put her other arm around him and hugged him.

“I just need some help right now,” she said and I noticed she was starting to look a little happier and not whimpering as much and I wondered if it was on account of her giving PaPa a hug or just her general mood swings, which I've noticed are pretty wicked when it comes to tweakers. The hug didn't last very long, though, and PaPa pushed her away with quite a bit of force for such an old man and picked his cane up off the table and started swinging at her like she was the one with the gun now and he was the one trying to protect

himself. I would've tried to help or get him to stop but I hadn't seen him that mean or nasty ever and I wasn't about to get tied up in the middle of it all.

“You always need help,” he yelled. “You always need help. Get out of my sight. Just get out of my sight.”

I didn't know why he was repeating everything twice but he swung the cane one last time and that time Mom actually had to move back to keep it from popping her right in the head and she started crying and ran up the stairs and I wondered if she knew that her room wasn't exactly her room any more and that PaPa had given it to me but then I felt bad on account of it seeming like a lousy time to be selfish. PaPa opened up the oven and slid the cookie sheet full of biscuits in and slammed the door and set the timer.

We sat at the kitchen table and PaPa brewed coffee which took forever and neither of us were talking and then he poured it into this black mug that said “TO KNOW HIM AND TO MAKE HIM KNOWN, Well of Life Pentecostal Church of God” and I wondered why I hadn't gotten a mug or something nice like that. At least I got filled with the Spirit. After a while of sitting there in silence I got up and opened the fridge door which I was pretty used to doing by that point but PaPa got up and slammed the door before I could fish out something to drink. He stuck his silver snake in my face and got down like he was going to get mad at me but he actually just really talked to me for almost the first time since I got there.

“What do you think about that?”

“Think about what?” I said. Over the last few days I'd seen him catch some pretty wicked mood swings: he'd been depressed and happy as I'd ever seen him and angrier than I'd ever seen him like all at once. But when I thought about it I realized that we'd all been on

a pretty topsy-turvy ride on account of the fact that I'd just gotten Jesus in my heart and on top of that PaPa and I only knowing each other for a couple of weeks for like the first times in our lives or something.

“What do you think about your mother coming home and wanting to stay?”

At first I didn't know why he'd care at all about what I thought about the matter since he was a pretty opinionated old man and everything but then I realized that he might be testing me or something like that since I'd just gotten filled with the Holy Ghost and now I was on official prophet. When I thought about it that way, I thought maybe he wasn't testing me at all and maybe I'd finally reached such a high up wise position on account of the Spirit that he actually wanted to know what I thought. I tried to think up the most wise, religious thing I could think of, and I put on a serious, spiritual face or whatever.

“We should throw her a feast, because that's what God's going to do for me on account of the fact that I'm a prodigal and all.” Mom might've even been a bigger prodigal than me. Who knew?

He pulled his cane back and shook his head and snorted and looked out the window over the sink.

“You only get one feast in this house. After that you're on your own.”

“Why just one?”

“Well at least one is the Christian thing to do.”

The timer on the oven started buzzing which almost scared me to death and PaPa put on an oven mitt and pulled the cookie sheet and scraped all the biscuits – which looked like they were burnt pretty bad on the bottom – onto a plate and dropped them in front of me.

“Go on up and take these to your mother.”

Chapter 19

When I got upstairs with the biscuits Mom was on the bed with her face buried in the pillow and when I shut the door behind me her whole body jerked like she'd just heard a gun go off right next to her. I noticed that she wasn't crying any more but her face was all red and her eyes were bloodshot which looked pretty bad but was probably a lot better than her eyes being black on account of the fact that I was a lot less scared of her when she wasn't tweaking. All those times I'd tried to imagine about what it'd been like when Mom was living in that room didn't exactly fit with what I saw, though. Even though I was a boy and didn't really fit in with all the pink stuff in the room it made way more sense that seeing a strung out old woman there. I know she's my Mom and I shouldn't call her a strung out old woman, but that was basically what I was looking at. I sat down on the edge of the bed and she crawled on all fours like an animal and sat down next to me.

"These are for you," I said and I offered her the biscuits which she grabbed out of my hand and started shoving in her mouth like she hadn't eaten in a week which I couldn't blame her for because she probably hadn't and besides, I knew what that felt like. Still, it was sort of sad and scary to watch at the same time. After she'd crammed about three of them in her

mouth she sat the plate down and threw her arms on me and started crying again and I could feel her tears on my neck and the little bits of biscuits that came flying out when she tried to breathe. She was trying to say something but I couldn't understand her on account of her mouth being full.

“What?”

She held out her hand like she wanted me to wait or be quiet and then swallowed and took a big breath and hugged me again.

“I'm so glad you're here. I thought coming back here was a bad idea, but now I know I was supposed to come so that I could see you.”

The way she was hanging on me I could see right down her shirt and she wasn't wearing a bra or anything like that I didn't want to see Mom like that so I turned and looked the other direction.

“What's the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Aren't you glad to see your mother?”

I really didn't know how to answer that question so I just nodded despite the fact that part of me wanted to tell her everything and reassure her and tell her that I'd gotten saved and that she could get saved too but the other part of me still wanted to leave her there with her biscuit crumbs and never speak to her again. She slid down on the floor like a snake and put her head in my lap and started wailing again which I was starting to get pretty sick of even though she was my mother and I knew what it was like to show up at PaPa's after you'd hit a rough patch for a while.

“I'm in trouble, Goose.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Curly T’s dead and your dad probably is, too. What if they come after me?”

I pushed her off of my lap and stood up over her and the side of me that sort of wished she was dead or at least not back in my life swelled back up. All kinds of questions started swirling around in my head like how did Curly T die and what happened to Dad and did Mom know that Dad was around and did she know I was with him and if she did why didn’t she try and come get me and was it okay to feel sort of good about Curly T being dead. I wanted answers pretty bad but it didn’t seem like Mom was the one that could give them to me and for a second I just wanted to run down and hide behind PaPa like I’d done at church.

“Why do you think Dad’s dead?”

“He wasn’t at the motel. His room burnt to the ground. They found Curly T there and he was all burnt up but he had three bullet holes in him. The lab blew up. Your father’s missing. The lab blew up but he still had three bullet holes in him.” She leaned on the bed and started sobbing harder and I wanted nothing more in the world but to be gone, or at least invisible, because even though PaPa was there to help me now I knew he couldn’t help with any of this and for the first time in a while I felt like I was back on my own again, scared out of my mind and doing whatever it took to just keep safe and fed and alive even if I did have the Spirit and Jesus was inside of me. I closed my eyes real tight and tried to focus on Jesus being there in my heart, living and guiding me and telling me what to do, and I tried my hardest to listen for him to tell me what to do but I didn’t hear anything except for all Mom’s wailing. Then I remembered Dad’s gun.

“Dad did it. He had a gun.”

Mom got quiet all of a sudden and just stared at me for a while.

“Your daddy wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

I thought about how he’d threatened to kill me a few times and I thought about telling her so that maybe she’d see that he wasn’t that nice of a guy but I decided that maybe she wasn’t ready for that kind of information and on top of that she’d want to know what I did and I’d be a liar if I didn’t tell her that I pissed myself and Dad called me a pussy.

“Well who did it then?”

I tried to sound as smart and grown-up as possible so she’d reconsider that maybe Dad had done it which would’ve meant that Dad wasn’t dead, just a killer.

“There’s these two brothers that were in prison with your daddy. They did it and they probably killed your daddy, too.”

“The Goodwin brothers?”

“How’d you know?”

“Just because I haven’t been around you doesn’t mean I haven’t been in the world for the last few months. What’ve they got to do with Dad and Curly T and the motel?” Right after the words came out of my mouth it hit me that Mom was talking about Dad’s motel room like I knew about it. I didn’t even let her answer my question. “Did you know I was with Dad all that time?”

She just stared at me like I’d caught her right in the middle of a lie and then she started crying again which I was getting pretty sick of even though she was a total wreck. You can’t just tell someone his dad’s dead on the same day that his mother’s just come back from the grave and he’s gotten himself filled with the Holy Ghost and expect everything to be about you.

“I couldn’t do anything about it,” she said. “I couldn’t. Curly T and your daddy were cooking the shit and selling it and Curly T said if I told anyone he’d kill me.”

“What’s that got to do with the Goodwin brothers?”

“They were the ones that set your daddy up with the money to get everything going. They had everything set up for when he got out of prison. They had friends at the casino that gave him the money and he was supposed to get things cooking and sell it off and get money ready for them because they had this whole escape planned but then he got Curly T involved and the two of them sort of got into the stuff – your daddy’s had a problem for a long time and he hasn’t been clean except for when he was in the pen – and the two of them started thinking that the Goodwin’s weren’t never going to get out of that place. But they did. And now Curly T and your daddy are dead.” She covered up her face and started rocking back and forth on the ground. “They’re dead. And I loved him, Goose. I loved Curly T. And I loved your daddy. And they’re dead. And if they find me, I’m dead, too.”

The whole mess was terrifying and I realized for the first time that God really did have a plan for me on account of everything going so deep. I’d known that I was supposed to get the Spirit so that I could be the one and all that and save my family but I didn’t have any idea that there would be people out after them with guns and basically like a whole drug war going on and everything but I guess that’s what you get when you’re the one that’s chosen to save everybody. How exciting would all the *Star Wars* stories be if there hadn’t been any blasters or near-death experiences or none of that? Still, I was terrified.

“How’d Dad get mixed up with the Goodwins?”

I had to know everything if I was going to make things right.

“He owed them. Some spic from Wewoka tried to kill your daddy and one of them saved him. Plus they were supposed to cut him in on some of it. I don’t really know, Goose. I just don’t know.”

I was sort of mad at her and hated her guts for knowing that I was in that hellhole with Dad all that time and she didn’t do anything about it on account of me being her only son but I reminded myself that even though they were my parents and even if Dad was dead that I had to be the big one and I had to act cool and make decisions that I thought real serious adults would make and I wondered how long it would take for the Spirit to kick in so that I could start using it to make everything right. It was hard to act serious and tough because I was scared as I’d been in my whole life and all I could think about was Henry and what he’d say or do but it wasn’t any help because he was brainwashed and didn’t seem to believe in the Holy Ghost. I wished none of it’d happened and that it was just me and him again, staying in his trailer, even if the food wasn’t as good as at PaPa’s. I couldn’t tell PaPa about any of this either on account of the fact that he already had it out for Mom pretty bad anyway.

Mom sort of went into a trance and got pretty quiet and I could tell that she was basically done crying but she was starting to sweat pretty bad and she wouldn’t stop rubbing her hands on her thighs and even though I was pretty mad at her I felt sorry for her all of a sudden and sort of wanted to give her a hug. I didn’t though, on account of me needing to look like I wasn’t all emotional – even though I was as emotional as I’d ever been. I’d cried a little earlier but it was easy right then to act serious because I’m not big of a crier.

Mom was just sitting there, sweating and twitching and acting all crazy which I didn’t understand since she wasn’t tweaked out and I wondered if I should tell her about everything

that had happened to me and I actually wondered why she hadn't asked seeing as I was her kid and I'd been gone for some time and then I remembered that she'd known I was with Dad and didn't do anything and I figured she just didn't care on account of Curly T and him being a threatening and violent guy in general. I told myself it wasn't her fault even though part of me was starting to realize that it was. I reminded myself, though, that if none of that stuff would of happened that I never would of gotten Jesus in my heart and that was the path that God had put me on. When I started to think of it all that way – as a path that had been laid out in front of me like a destiny or something – I just had to tell Mom and it all just sort of poured out of faster than I could control.

“I made friends with this guy named Henry who's pretty nice except lately and I saw the Deer Woman like you said I would when I was with Dad and when he kicked me out I went with Henry and he and me and this real live shaman and this tweaker kid all buried his grandma who was dead but then the government came just like you said and took me away and brought me here and then I got Jesus in my heart and today I went down with PaPa to the church and got filled up with the Holy Spirit. And by the way, why'd you tell me that PaPa was dead?”

“You got what?”

She looked like she'd seen a dead man walk up and put his dirty hands, fresh from the grave, on my shoulders and I figured she was scared about the Deer Woman.

“I saw the Deer Woman when I was living with Dad.”

“You got filled with the Spirit?”

She got on all fours and started backing up like the dead man was coming for her and I couldn't figure out for the life of me why she didn't seem too scared that the devil in the

form of a naked woman with hooves for feet had kissed me like in the movies and tried to get me to do some pretty wicked stuff, but I figured maybe she just heard the good news since she hadn't had any in a while.

“Yeah I got the Spirit,” I said. “And today I got filled up with it and spoke in tongues like the angels speak in. Don't worry, Mom, I got everything under control. We're all going to get saved and get things right.”

She didn't look as happy as I thought she should be and her eyes went dead and she covered her mouth up with her hands.

“He's got *you* mixed up in that bullshit?”

I guess if Henry thought I was crazy – and he was a good Christian man – than I should've expected Mom would, too. I realized that I should've just kept my mouth shut and done things on my own. But it was too late for that.

“I got the Spirit and there's nothing that's bullshit about that. I know you and PaPa don't exactly like each other and that you both go around telling each other that the other one is dead, but I got this going for me and it's the first thing I ever had going for me.”

She was still shaking and I couldn't tell anymore if it was on account of her being scared of the Goodwin brothers or that Curly T was dead or that Dad might be dead or that I'd scared her off by telling her that I got Jesus in my heart and all that. I didn't know what to say to make her feel better and I started racking my brain for what the proper religious thing to do would be or what a prophet would do and so I thought back to church that morning - which was basically the only religious experience I'd ever had – and remembered when Ms. Bumpass had gone up front and the guy in the leather vest had prayed with her.

“Come on, let’s pray,” I said. “Everything’s going to be just fine. We just need to give it up to God or whatever.”

She just kept staring at me and not saying anything and so I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her up right next to me so that we were both kneeling at the bottom of the bed and I put my hand on her back like that man had done to Ms. Bumpass and Mom just kept staring at me like she couldn’t believe a thing she was seeing, which I sort of understood since I was basically a whole new person since she’d seen me last and I put my head down and closed my eyes but wasn’t sure what to say since the only prayer I’d said so far was the one I said to get Jesus in my heart, and PaPa gave me all the words for that one. So I tried my hardest.

“God, make sure that Mom’s alright and I’m alright and don’t let Dad be dead and don’t let anyone know that Mom knew Curly T so that she doesn’t get in any more trouble and maybe could you get the Goodwin brothers arrested or shot dead or something so that they’ll leave my family alone. I invite you, Jesus, to be lord of my life, and to live in my heart forever.” I didn’t know what else to say and when I finally took a pause to figure out what to do next, Mom started crying again which didn’t annoy me, which I assumed meant that I was in the Spirit, and she grabbed me pretty hard and pulled me into her.

“Are you done?” she asked.

“I guess.”

“You got to end it.”

“How?”

“Say *amen*.”

“Amen.”

Chapter 20

I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do about saving everyone and being the one and fulfilling my destiny and all that so I was glad that for the first couple of weeks Mom was there she didn't hardly do anything but sleep. PaPa didn't say much about it either which surprised me, but I was pretty glad on account of me probably not being able to listen to him talk about her being a whore or dead or whatever nasty things he was going to say. He didn't hardly acknowledge her at all except when she'd come down stairs every couple days and eat whatever she could find. Even though PaPa didn't seem that happy about her being around he was still cooking her food at every meal and putting it in the fridge when she didn't eat it. Before the two weeks was up the fridge was full of egg salad and baked beans and hamburger patties and scrambled eggs and biscuits and enough bacon to bring a whole pig back to life.

I couldn't ever go in my room and PaPa was usually dozing on the couch and communing with God and being an old man in general so I took to hanging out in his room a lot and I finally got around to finishing *Return of the Jedi* which PaPa said was evil and a waste of my time but I think that's just on account of the fact that he didn't realized how

much it was like a lot of the Bible stories he told me. I knew I had to start reading the Bible soon if I was going to be a great prophet and all that and I had the one that PaPa gave me that used to be Mom's but I was sort of intimidated by how long it was and on top of that I wasn't sure where to start plus there was the fact that it was Mom's and now that she was back she might be wanting it. I tried reading it from the beginning once, but even though everything getting made was sort of cool in its own boring sort of way I wanted to get to the parts where Jesus fought the devil and had all of his adventures but I couldn't find it so I just stuck with my books. That's one thing I did learn from Dad when I was staying with him: you got to finish things you start.

PaPa's room smelled like him and the rest of the house only stronger like they'd made the frozen canned version of him and there were two matching beds in the room and this big desk by the door that had shelves all up over it covered in books. He had like all of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* books from 1979 and a bunch of books by a man named Binny Hinn and *The Life of Smith Wigglesworth* and a bunch of books called *Systematic Theology* and after a while I got tired of looking since none of them were interesting or actually had any real stories in them.

Right there on the desk there was a picture of a lady that basically looked just like Mom except it felt more old-timey and I realized it must've been MiMa only it sort of weirded me out because she was young and pretty and like attractive in the way that a young guy feels about his girlfriend if he's got one, which I didn't. It's not like I was so stupid that I didn't realize that old people were young once, it just catches you off guard when you don't really know what your MiMa looks like and you don't put it together until after you've decided that the person you're looking at is pretty good looking.

I pulled the chain on this big, green, glass lamp and the whole place lit up and I noticed that he had this antique looking typewriter and I tried to imagine PaPa when he was young, slaving over the typewriter, writing sermons or whatever for his church. I imagined him with his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth like cartoon characters do when they're trying to concentrate and looking for facts and whatnot to put in the sermon in his encyclopedias and his Bible and trying to get some inspiration from his *Systematic Theology* book which sounded like they should've been for learning about the beauty of God and all that. And MiMa would be there, too, looking good and young and bringing him plates of food and being proud of him and it was pretty much the most normal way I'd ever imagined anyone in my family doing anything. So what if he was kind of crazy? He had a pretty good thing going at one point, and you can't ask for much more than that. Even though I was, sort of, in wanting to be a prophet and the family's savior and all that.

I sat in his chair and tried to pretend I was him and stuck my tongue out of the corner of my mouth and pretended to bang away at the typewriter but then I remembered Mom was upstairs, sweating out all that chicken feed and I felt bad for having fun when I was supposed to be on a mission so I tried to focus as much as possible and finish *The Return of the Jedi*.

It was sort of what I'd expected, but it turned out that Darth Vader wasn't actually the one that was *all* bad and that the Emperor basically had him under this spell like Vader was possessed or something. *He* was like pure evil which made me feel much better about my Dad, on account of the fact that he did seem like sort of a nice guy even though he told me a few times he was going to kill me when I hadn't even done anything. There were *worse* people than my dad, people like the Goodwin brothers. I didn't like thinking about how there could be people out there worse than my Dad and at the same time I felt sort of guilty about

feeling that way on account of him being my Dad in the end, but it was good to think that way, because if there were people out there that were worse than Dad – people that were pure evil like the Emperor – that meant that Dad could still be saved if he wasn't already dead like Mom thought he was.

Around that time I heard voices coming from downstairs and I was pretty interested as to what was happening on account of it being the first time since Mom got back that her and PaPa had had any sort of conversation, so I dropped my book down on the table and crept out into the hallway and sort of peeked down at the living room through the banister. PaPa was standing up, leaning on his cane, and Mom was poking her finger right in his chest.

“I don't want you filling my son's head with that bullshit.” PaPa just looked at her and then closed his eyes and started rubbing them like he had a headache coming on or something. “You've done enough to screw up this family,” she said. “I ain't going to let you get to him, too.”

“You're not taking him anywhere,” PaPa said. The thought of Mom taking me somewhere hadn't really crossed my mind since I figured it would take a while for her to come off the meth and all that, but as soon as I heard PaPa say that I was scared again because I didn't want to go anywhere – even if it was with my own mother. I mean, I wanted to get her saved and all, but I was pretty sure that wasn't going to happen unless I could keep her at PaPa's and around good stuff and I thought maybe we could start going to church and stuff.

“He's my son, Dad. I'll do what I want with him.”

“Not according to DHS,” he said. “And I'm not filling him up with anything – this is God's work and you know it. Don't screw this up for me. You might be under Satan's wing,

but I'm not going to let you screw this up for me like you've screwed everything else up." It made me sort of sad to hear him treat her that way but at the same time I was sort of on his side because I wanted to stay. I tried to imagine being alone with Mom again and I got that feeling again like I did outside of the storage unit when it felt like that tree was taking me down to the middle of the earth and there was nothing I can do about it.

I didn't like them fighting, especially over me, so I figured it was probably the best time to let the Spirit do the work and maybe do a little prophesying for the first time. I snuck my Bible out of Mom's room and made my way down the stairs without a real plan other than to maybe read her some scriptures and get her to start thinking about salvation and all that, even though I didn't know where the scriptures about salvation even were. It was the Bible, though, so I figured in some ways the whole thing had to do with salvation in one way or another. The bottom step creaked and they both looked at me and I didn't know what to do so I just held the Bible out like I was some sort of dumb kid with a present and when I did Mom crossed the room and took it out of my hands.

"What are you doing with my Bible, Goose?"

"That's my Bible," I told her. "Or *our* Bible, I guess. If you want to read out of it together." When I got closer I noticed that she had these sores on her neck and on her forehead where it looked like she'd been scratching pretty hard and I was glad she was off the meth but felt pretty bad that she had to feel all those things and I said a prayer to myself that maybe she wouldn't hurt as much anymore. She looked at the cover of the thing and ran her fingers over the gold letters that spelled out her name and then she put the thing over her face and leaned back against the back of the couch and started moaning like she'd done the day when she came home after I'd gotten filled with the Spirit and I started to say a prayer of

thanksgiving for her taking the Bible, but when she took the book away from her face, I could tell by her eyes that she wasn't crying to let out all her sad feelings like I did when I got Jesus in my heart but that she was mighty mad. She was gritting her teeth pretty fast and all the lines in her face came out and before I knew what she was doing she leaned forward and threw our Bible as hard as she could against the sliding back door, which shattered. I was surprised by that on account of Bibles not being that heavy but I've heard that people who do meth are incredibly strong.

That's when she balled her fists up and started screaming at me like she was a bear or a lion or some kind of animal that makes loud sounds so that what it's hunting will get scared. Things are easier to catch when they're scared. I didn't know what to think of it but it pretty much worked on me because I was scared out of my mind. Not like Mom was big or scary or anything – I couldn't have taken her if I had to – it was just that I'd never seen her act like that before. And by *that* I mean not like a human.

I must've been showing how scared I was even though I was trying my hardest to look tough, which is basically just one of my instincts when people try to scare me, because her face went soft again and her eyes got droopy and she tilted her head to one side and looked at me like I was a sad sap or something and her tears came back and she put her arms out and walked towards me and I stepped backwards and when I did that her hands went up to her mouth and she looked out the window like she realized for the first time what she'd done.

"I'm sorry, baby." She basically sounded normal again like when I'd come in the room in the first place. "I'll get that for you."

She stepped back over to the glass door and jammed both of her hands through the shattered glass which was pretty stupid because it was pretty obvious that she wasn't going to reach down to the yard and I think she realized it, too, because when she couldn't get anything she started forcing her arms further and that's when the glass started cutting her forearms up real bad and before you knew it, there was blood running all over the glass and right about that time PaPa stepped in.

He didn't say a word but his face had this look on it like he'd seen just what he'd expected and he pushed past me and grabbed Mom and tried to pull her away. She fought it, though, and the more she did, the more her arms got all cut up and the sight of that blood was making me feel sort of sick.

“Just stop it, Mom. He's trying to help.”

I just wanted her to hear me or understand me or know what I was thinking, which she really never did even though she knew pretty much everything else in the world and I closed my eyes and I tried to pray and hear maybe what God was saying but I didn't hear anything. *I know how you feel*, was about all the prayer I could muster up and so I closed my eyes even tighter and clinched my fists and tried to concentrate as hard as I could so I could get the Spirit to do something or make something happen and then it hit me all at once that maybe I had a new language now that mom would understand even if she didn't really understand it and I relaxed my fists and tried to let the angels do the talking.

“Fobart tawney mella pertune.”

I opened my eyes and looked at her and she pulled her arms out of the glass and started shaking a little and then started screaming which I took to mean that she didn't understand a word I said because basically I just wanted her to know that she didn't need to

be afraid and that things were going to be okay for the most part and she didn't need to be reaching out the door anyway because what's done is done. She screamed again and then started hitting PaPa on the chest and all her blood was covering his shirt and when he fell back on the floor I sort of felt bad for him even though I'd given him my fair share of kicks and punches too.

"You put that poison in him." She wasn't screaming anymore, in fact she was sort of whispering, but you could still tell she was mad as hell. I didn't know what to do so I just clenched my fists tighter and started mumbling in tongues thinking that maybe if I said just the right combination of words the Spirit would come and do whatever it was that the Spirit was supposed to do in situations like that. The more I said, though, the madder she seemed to get and she didn't even seem to notice that she was bleeding pretty bad and she got up on top of PaPa, who was laying on the floor, and straddled him just like the Deer Woman did with me that night back at the motel when Dad was gone and I almost got into smoking cigarettes.

"Get out of this house!"

PaPa was yelling back and I felt pretty bad about the whole thing because I'd basically started it all with my tongues and I couldn't help but wonder if maybe that's what the Spirit wanted. After all, PaPa always said that God works in weird ways or something like that. I was pretty confused on account of not being sure who to feel more sorry for. Mom was still coming off the meth and acting pretty crazy and I couldn't figure out why she had it out for my new religious side and you didn't know when she'd snap and get crazy and mean which was unlike her because usually it always seemed like she was the one that people were mean to. She was the one that needed the saving and the Spirit and everything

in between and PaPa was fine and like this wise old Yoda type that didn't need any help but I didn't like the way that Mom was treating him because he was basically a good person and got me more than most and on top of that he was an old man and you shouldn't beat on old men.

The tongues weren't helping anything so I ran at Mom as fast as I could like I was some kind of pro football player or something and tackled her and she fell off of PaPa and we both landed the floor and she just sort of laid there and for a second I thought maybe I'd really hurt her or something but then I felt her foot come up between my legs and kick me harder than I'd ever been kicked. I went backwards then and PaPa raised up in the space between me and Mom and I wasn't really sure what I saw but I did see his cane go up in the air and for a second I caught the glint of that snake's red ruby eye and then in a flash it was gone and I heard Mom let out a powerful yelp like a puppy does when its mom accidentally steps on it after nursing.

"I don't know which you are," PaPa said. "A common whore or the devil himself. But I won't let you ruin this for me!"

He lifted his cane back up again and by that time I sort of had my bearings back and I thought about tackling him, too, but then I remembered how I'd just thought it was bad to hit an old man so I just sort of gave him a shove and when I did he turned around with his cane still up in the air and they both looked at me like they'd decided that they didn't want to fight with each other anymore and they didn't have to if they both ganged up on me and my heart skipped about three beats and my stomach got all twisted up and this thing jumped up inside of me like an instinct and told me not to think about what was going on and just do the only thing I was basically any good at. So I ran like hell.

Part III:
Up in Smoke

Chapter 21

Just like that I was basically right back where I'd started the whole thing: running and on my own. I'd basically run out on my mission in life, too, which I didn't have when I was on my own before. Man, I felt guilty about that. PaPa and everyone at the church had put all that stock in me and I was supposed to be this sort of hero prophet that could make everything alright but I couldn't even make it more than a few weeks like that without running out on everyone and proving that I was basically the scumbag that I'm sure they were all worried I'd turn out to be anyway. That burned me worse than anything. It wasn't like I'd run out on *everything* I'd become – there was still a chance I could make things right and that me running out was a part of the big master plan that I'd learned I was a part of. Thinking like that put me at ease a bit but I was still confused as hell because at least when I was with PaPa I had a hold on what that big master plan was. Now I was scared out of my mind and on the run and basically couldn't tell up from down. I tried to convince myself to be brave and to trust in God and his plan and all that and I took off again down the bank of the river.

After a couple of hours I could see that I was getting closer to town. You could see the back of the Whistle Stop and a bit farther the woods thinned out a bit and there was the motel. I couldn't see much because a sixteen wheeler had parked along the back lot and I was glad of that because I wasn't sure I could handle all the memories that would've come up and reminded me about how I was on my own again and anything could happen at any moment like getting trapped in a meth lab and working for your drug dealing dad. I remembered then that there'd been an explosion and a fire and so I decided to put my fears away and I snuck up behind the truck and looked around the backside. Sure enough, it looked like half the place had gone up in flames. The whole front side of the room where Dad and had been staying was blown out and you could see right in the room only you couldn't distinguish one thing from another because everything was black. The roof was caved in and there was yellow tape all over the place like you see on those crime shows on TV. The room where I'd met Henry was all sunk in, too, and I thought about Henry and wondered if he might've been around when it happened but I decided that the Love House probably wasn't letting him work since he was a reformed criminal, too.

Thinking of Henry made me want to cry but I held it in by biting in the inside of my cheek on account of the fact that you can't be going around crying when you're on your own and in some pretty deep trouble and there are people after you. It's a waste of time and energy. Henry sure would've been helpful to have around then but I knew I couldn't risk hanging around the government house or they'd catch me for sure. Besides, I had to sort out what I was going to do to get my mission back on track and all Henry'd do was try to tell me it was all snake oil.

I snuck back behind the truck and ran down to the river and let out again. I was only a couple of miles away from Piney River Mobile Homes and it was starting to get dark so I knew I could cross Main Street without getting seen if I went under the bridge and stayed away from the highway. I knew the woods pretty good back behind the trailers and no one was living in Henry's trailer anyway and that was the closest one to the river so I figured I could lay low there until I had things figured out. I walked as slow as possible so it'd get darker sooner and by the time I was to the bridge I made it under without anyone seeing me even though it turned out no cars were around anyway. There wasn't any bank under the bridge, only wet and cold cement that had this moss growing all over and I sort of slid down it and landed in the water. I was worried for a second on account of my new shoes and new clothes getting all wet and slimy and I knew PaPa would be pissed about the whole thing but then I remembered that PaPa was behind me now and that I wasn't going to be able to go back anyway unless I'd fixed everything and if I did that he wouldn't care about my clothes anyway. After all, only material people are that into clothes. I wasn't too worried about getting cold, neither, on account of it being almost July and hot as hell, even at night. I got out from under the bridge and kept on down the river bank.

Before too long I could make out the back of Henry's trailer. It was dark but the moonlight shown off of the white metal and with the two windows on the backside it sort of looked like a face staring down at me. By that point I was completely exhausted from walking and running so much, especially with my shoes all filled with water, so I collapsed on the ground and sat up against the tree and even though I knew it was a bad idea, I lost control and started crying. Just thinking of myself crying made me cry even harder and before too long I was just gasping for air and my chest hurt and my whole body wanted me to

stop crying so I could get some air but my head wouldn't let me. Or some part of me. I started banging my fists on the ground until I hit a rock with one hand and I just didn't know what to do so I jammed my hands down in the dirt and picked up two big pile of it and stood up and threw it at the river and it made me feel a little better so I kept at it for a while until I was exhausted and I fell back down on the ground but I still couldn't stop from crying.

How could I just run out on Mom like that? I was supposed to be the one that saved her and all I could do was run away, which was supposed to be the kind of thing I'd of done when I was a coward and I didn't have Jesus in my heart and I wasn't saved and on the right path. I was alone again, only this time I didn't have anyone to go to or anyone to help me. I could try to come up with some sort of plan but what was I going to do? I wanted Henry to be there pretty bad but I knew he wasn't an option. Besides, he was brainwashed by the government and probably wouldn't want to help anyway on account of the fact that they'd probably told him they'd send him to jail if he tried to help a flunky like me again.

I got up and paced around a bit to get my brain going and when I was up I looked around for that tree where I'd carved my name to mark my home but I couldn't find it anywhere. I hadn't been gone that long but all of the trees seemed weird to me like they had minds of their own and they didn't recognize me neither. Finally I just sat down on the ground again and I was feeling pretty woozy from all the running and crying and the fit I'd thrown so I laid back on the ground and looked up at the stars through the tops of the trees and tried to think about the galaxy and I tried to imagine some of the stories from *Star Wars* but for the first time they didn't make me feel any better. They didn't have anything to do with my situation and as hard as I tried to figure out which story I could put myself in and figure things out none of them worked. That made me feel a little better for a second because

it was like I was on an adventure that even Luke Skywalker or Hans Solo hadn't been on but that second didn't last very long. As soon as I thought of it that way it just made me feel even more alone.

Everything was quiet except for the frogs croaking and the leaves that were rustling and the constant whir made the night sky start to sound like the ocean it already looked like. As I stared at the stars the buzz the bugs were making started to sound like a noise that the stars were making. Each star was buzzing at it's own pitch and all together it just sounded like a sea of ringing and buzzing and then I remembered how I'd learned in school once that the light coming from the stars was really old – like hundreds or thousands of years old – and that the real star might not even be alive anymore and I thought about Dad being dead and PaPa and Mom fighting and how Henry was gone and washed out by the government and I wondered if after I died – which was basically the first time I'd ever really thought hard about it – if something would keep shouting out and buzzing or giving out light so people would think I was still there.

I decided then that since I didn't have anywhere else to go that I was going to stick to my mission and use the special gifts I got when I was filled up with the Spirit to make everything better and I thought that maybe I'd just run away and made things worse so that Jesus could make everything even sweeter like he was supposed to and thinking of it that way made me feel better and I remembered that that's what you're supposed to do when you got faith: not think about how things actually are and just press on anyway. It was a test, I decided, and I was going to pass it even if things had to get worse before they got better. I knew just what I had to do to get everything going back in the right direction, too: I was going to do that fast like Jesus did and not eat or drink anything for forty days or however

long it took to face the devil and get the power of the Spirit so I could heal Mom and maybe bring Dad back from the dead if that's what he was. I felt bad for thinking that, though, because there was no way I was going to get someone back from the dead. That was for Jesus. I didn't know much about fasting but thinking about it made me feel pretty good and I sort of got embarrassed for doing all that crying and I let the hum of the cicadas and the slow trickle of the river put me to sleep.

The sun woke me up the next day and I was feeling pretty good despite the fact that I was a runaway again and everything was on the edge of going to hell back at PaPa's. My clothes and shoes were all dried up and my decision to get to fasting sort of gave me a new sense of purpose and made running away not seem as much like a bad idea as just another part of the big journey I was on which was basically a story with me as the hero.

I wasn't exactly sure what you were supposed to do when you were doing a fast. I mean, I knew what you *weren't* supposed to do, or at least what PaPa told me you weren't supposed to do, which was eat and drink. I figured I'd be fine not eating and all on account of me having so much to eat over the last few weeks and me starting to get fat and all – at least fat for someone that was basically just a bag of bones before – but I was pretty thirsty from all the running and I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to go forty days like Jesus did in the story PaPa told me. I sort of wished I'd of stopped on my way through the yard and picked up Mom's Bible so maybe I could look that story up and figure out what exactly I was supposed to be doing. I didn't even know if I could make it forty days like Jesus. After all, he had like special powers and everything, which I didn't have yet. Or maybe he didn't have them until after he'd done his fast. I figured I'd just play it by ear.

In the light, the woods out behind Henry's trailer looked a bit more like I remembered and it didn't take me long to find that tree where I'd marked my territory. I fingered the marks a bit and thought about how stupid I'd been to think everything would just stay the way it was with Henry and his grandma but I didn't like thinking about how stupid I was so I wandered back down to the river bank and sat down on the same rock where I'd been sitting while Henry dug the old lady's grave. It creeped me out pretty bad that you could still see the thing, actually. I mean, it wasn't just like we'd left it – and I don't mean with a body in it, which is an obvious fact – but it was just a sort of shallow dent in the ground about the size of a human and it had this little pool of water in it that was still and not all rippled like the river. The Cimarron didn't move that much anyway and by that I mean there weren't big rapids or anything like that. In fact, some of the time it looked just as still as the pool where Henry's grandma's body'd been laying. It wasn't that big, neither: maybe twenty feet across. And it was just red like the mud all around it. That's the way most of Cimarron is: red and not that big and muddy. At least the parts I've seen, which aren't that many.

After an hour of sitting on that rock and then laying and then sitting again, I realized that taking a fast was one of the most boring things I'd ever done in my entire life. It felt a lot like sitting outside of the storage unit while Mom and her boyfriends visited. I guess that's just what it was in the end: waiting. But waiting for what? God, I guess. I wasn't totally sure, though, why I had to wait around on God if he was right there in my heart the whole time. In books and the movies and everything, power was like something that just came to you, like lightning. It always just came at the right time, too, when people needed it and not a day later when the person's mom was all cut up and they were squatting in the woods behind a dead lady's trailer. I tried not to think about it all sad like that, though.

I decided that maybe I should do some praying or something or maybe just think as hard as I could about God and that was the point of fasting and so I did. First I prayed that I wouldn't be hungry or thirsty, and when that didn't work I prayed that I'd get the power of the Spirit pretty fast on account of me not being sure how long I could take being hungry and thirsty. It's a funny thing: the more you eat the hungrier you get when you don't got food. I thought my second prayer was a pretty good one and made some sense. If God wasn't going to take away the hunger than he'd better hurry up and get the thing done, whatever it was.

After a while I got tired of all the praying and I decided to just maybe sit there and think about God. That passed the time a bit faster because it was like I was listening and not doing all the talking, which can be exhausting, especially when you don't know what to say. I remembered that PaPa said that you're not supposed to eat so that when you were hungry, you'd realize how much you depended on God. So I thought since I didn't have any food that thinking of God would make things a bit easier. The truth was it didn't. I don't know why but thinking about God made me sad. I started thinking about how I was pretty young and if I lived to be as old as Henry's grandma that I had more time than I could imagine to think about God. It kind of got me down to think about living your whole life trying to think about someone when everything else was just going to stay the same. The river'd stay muddy and the rock I was sitting on would still be there and the only thing that'd change was that I'd get old and have to breathe through an oxygen mask. I don't mean to say that I didn't think anything would happen. I was pretty sure that if I did things right that I'd get all the powers I needed and that everything would go back to normal. And that would all be on account of God, too. But it wasn't like he was going to come down and sit on the rock with me and have a chat, even though I wished he would pretty bad, especially with me not really

having anyone to talk to or help me figure things out until I set everything straight. And when everything was fixed I probably wouldn't need him to chat with me anyway.

I felt bad then about being sad about thinking about Jesus and how it made me feel like I was going to get old pretty fast and there was nothing to do about it and so I said another prayer and said I was sorry for feeling like Jesus was making things worse and not better. It's not like I actually *thought* that, I just sort of felt like I didn't *not* think that. I should've been excited like all the people in the church that clapped their hands and sang and were so excited they did pretty cheesy things like run around the room with a bunch of magicians scarves all tied together, dancing like Jesus was right there.

While I was sitting there and trying my hardest to feel good about Jesus a lizard ran up on the rock and stood real still right next to me. It was one of those little brown lizards with the real long tails that will grow back if you cut them off, which his was. It went out about half way and then just sort of went flat. I sort of felt sorry for him and wondered who'd cut it off and then I realized that people weren't the only ones that could've done it. Besides, they're real hard to catch anyway because they're so fast. You've got to get them cornered and when you do you got to worry about them biting you. It doesn't really hurt or anything, but no one likes to get bitten. Maybe it's the sharp teeth or just the idea of something being mad at you. He looked up at me and I was thinking about catching him when he dove to the edge of the rock and scooped up this giant black cricket that I hadn't even seen. He sort of started trying to swallow it without even chewing it and you could see the crickets legs all flailing around, like he knew that he was headed straight for that lizard's stomach. I reached for him but he scampered down the side of the rock and went underneath. I wouldn't've eaten a cricket but I was sure getting hungry.

Around noon I heard a car door slam up in the Piney River and I was starting to get sort of shaky so I jumped down and hid and peered over the place where I was sitting.

My mind would wander and I wasn't very good and doing any praying or thinking about God but every time my stomach turned over it was like hearing the bell at school and my mind went straight back to why I was doing what I was doing, which was pretty convenient on account of me getting more and more hungry and wanting to quit more and more. There was no way I was going to make it forty days, that was for sure and I started worrying that maybe Jesus only gave you the power of the Spirit if you waited the whole forty days. It was like how Mom used to tell me that Santa wouldn't bring me nothing unless I waited all night, only scarier, because I wised up about Santa pretty young and knew that Mom was bluffing about not giving me the gifts which it took her so long to save up for. But I knew God wouldn't mess around, if that's how he worked. I figured with Jesus you only got once chance. Well, you had two chances, technically, on account of him forgiving you for being a sinner and all that when you made Jesus the Lord of your life. Like PaPa said, you only get one party.

It started getting upwards of a hundred degrees in the mid-afternoon, so I hung all my clothes on the branches of one of the blackjack oaks – everything but my underwear, of course – and took a dip in the river. I went all the way out to the middle. The Cimarron is so shallow, you see, that you can go sit down in the middle of it – if it hasn't been raining like mad – and the water only goes up to your chin. I think it might be bigger somewhere else, but not in Cimarron. I was just glad it wasn't completely dried up right then. It felt nice to feel the water rush on past me and after a while I floated on my back and pissed and everything felt warm before it drifted away and I wondered how I had any piss left in me

anyway. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and despite the fact that all I could think about was eating and drinking, I was glad to be out on my own for a while and to have my own little place out in the river and I thought about how Anthony said that Cimarron meant *wanderer* and I was pretty happy with myself for a second about being out on my own and wandering myself and I leaned back and let my head go underwater and I pretended like some important spiritual person was baptizing me and when I came up I lifted my hands up to the air like I was exalted or righteous or something and smiled at God.

I got out and laid in the grass up from the bank a bit and thought about how funny it was that I'd gone days without eating before and not thought a thing about it on account of all my other troubles but when I didn't eat on purpose that all I could think about was food. After a few hours of lying there the sun finally started to go down and I realized that I'd made it most of the whole day and I felt happy and like I could do it forever and I was glad that sleep was coming quick. You can't be hungry or thirsty when you're sleeping after all. I put my clothes back on and curled up on my side and said some prayers about getting the Spirit and healing Mom and all that and tried to fall asleep.

Chapter 22

The only thing is that I never really got to sleep. I guess I just had so much going on in my head and I was having to work real hard to keep thinking positive and all that while most of my thoughts were about how bad things were really going and how I was going to end up alone in the end. I mean, I'd doze off for a minute or two and sometimes those couple of minutes would feel like hours but then I'd be wide awake again and I'd realize that no time had actually passed at all.

I started praying that maybe I'd get some rest because based on what I knew sleep was allowed when you were fasting and even though I knew I was supposed to be feeling hungry and thirsty and everything I didn't think God would mind me wanting it to go away for a bit so I could sleep. Sleep's natural, after all. I was sort of cursing myself, too, for letting PaPa get me all fat and happy so that I couldn't even make it a day and a night without eating nothing. If I could've gone back and told myself when I was living with Dad or on the run that I wasn't going to be able to make it a day without eating I would've laughed at myself and probably called myself a pussy or something.

The night passed and when the sun came up in the morning I was almost afraid of it on account of it being a reminder that I should've been asleep and not tossing and turning all night. I was so hungry that I sort of wanted to throw up even though I didn't have anything to throw up and when I stood up off the ground it felt like all the blood in my head and maybe even my brain – which might've been liquefied in the night or something – drained down to my feet and when I tries to walk my legs were real heavy and I actually sort of fell down and it took me two tried before I was up on my feet.

By noon, though, I was feeling a bit better. Not better like I was completely okay but better like I was starting to feel numb all over and maybe I was getting used to it and I started to think that maybe there was hope and I wasn't too fat and spoiled to make it a while without the necessities of life. I was thirsty, though, too, and even when things were bad I'd always been able to at least come up with a little water or if I was lucky some Mt. Dew that Dad brought back from the WhistleStop and I started realizing that even if the hunger was what was hurting the worst that it was going to be my thirsty state that would be the end of me. I wondered if you could go forty days without drinking any water and if maybe it was stupid of me to be hanging around a river – even if it was a shallow muddy one – when I was purposely not drinking and I told myself that when I got out of all that and got Mom saved and we put everything back to normal like it used to that I was going to tell her and hopefully Dad about everything I'd had to do. And then I felt guilty on account of that being pride or something like that. It seemed like sacrifice and all that wasn't something that you should make a lot of fuss over. You just had to hope that somebody else would notice and make the fuss for you.

Around sunset my head started to get heavy and I was as sleepy as I'd been in a while but for some reason I still couldn't fall asleep and when I sat down to try to sleep I noticed that these lights would sometimes flash across my eyes like something was running in front of me but when I'd turn to see where it'd gone, it'd be gone. Sometimes the light would even give me a bit of a scare and my whole body would jerk and I'd realize that I'd started falling asleep and then woken myself up with my jerking around and I'd say a prayer that I'd just set still since it was pretty clear that God wasn't going to answer my prayers to fall asleep.

Right before the sun went down for good I noticed a jackrabbit on the other side of the river, sniffing around in the pine needles. His black tail and his nose kept twitching and he kept looking around and even right at me but he didn't seem to care that I was there which I took to mean that I wasn't jerking around as much as I thought I was or maybe I'd just sort of lost my sense of time or something like that and so I thought it was happening more often than it actually was. He moved off of the needles and into the dirt and made his way down to the water where he put his nose down in the water and twitched it around and I wondered if he was maybe looking at his reflection or if he was drinking and I wished for one second that I was him so that I could lap just a little water right up out of the water.

He was in the middle of licking his paw when all of a sudden his ears jerked upright and he sort of stood up on his hind legs and got real alert and I realized how big he was. Big as a regular sized dog almost, it seemed, and he was jerking his head in every which way like he knew someone was there which I thought was kind of funny at the time because I was there – right there – and he didn't seem to notice or care. Right about that time, though, I saw these two black triangles slowly come up behind the hill past the river bank and then

after those triangles there were a pair of eyes and that's when I realized I was looking right at a bobcat and he was looking right at that jackrabbit.

I was sitting and leaning against a blackjack when I saw the cat and I tried to do something to warn the jackrabbit but I couldn't move a muscle and it was like I was frozen or something. I don't know why I wanted to warn him – bobcats catching rabbits is nature and all that, after all – but right then I wanted him to get away on account of the fact that it made me sort of happy that he let me watch him all that time without making a fuss and running away. I tried to say something but my throat was so dry that I couldn't really make a noise and when I tried to swallow it just hurt like hell so I tried to wave my hands but they just felt like dead weight and I tried to kick, too, but they were just the same. That cat came up over the hill all crouched down and every time that rabbit would look his way he'd freeze. Jackrabbits are mighty fast if you don't know, so I knew if he'd spot the cat that he'd be out of there before that cat had his chance. *Run*, I wanted to yell. *Run like hell*.

Just like that the bobcat was in the air and the jackrabbit saw him and started kicking his back legs but they didn't go anywhere and he sort of looked like one of those people or animals in cartoons that run so fast they run in the same place and all that smoke or whatever gets up like a cloud behind them and in sort of slow motion like I was watching a documentary that cat had his big paw with all the claws out right down on the rabbit's back and the rabbit started screaming the worst scream you've ever heard in your entire life. I mean I thought rabbits were pretty quiet animals and I might've even thought they couldn't make a noise but this one let out such a high pitched scream it was like a thousand babies were being massacred or something all at once and he looked across the river and looked me right in the eyes like he wanted to know why I didn't warn him and then his screaming

stopped when the cat sunk his hot teeth in around his neck. I heard a snap and the rabbit went limp and that's when I felt something warm run down my face and I realized that I was crying for the first time even though I couldn't make a sound or move or anything.

The cat tore at the rabbit's neck and a puff of fur went up and pulled so hard the skin stretched out at least a foot and then broke, and blood started to squirt out of the rabbit's neck and the cat just sat there with a chunk of neck in his mouth and that's when he looked across the river and saw me sitting there, staring at him. He dropped the rabbit's meat on the ground and that's when I came to my senses and could move my body, only all I did was try to stand up and the blood went back to my legs and I fell backwards and hit my head on the blackjack and fell over on my side.

It was around Christmas and me and Mom were sitting on the floor in our house on Garden Street. I could tell it was Christmas on account of the little silver Christmas tree that was setting in the corner on the front side of the house that Mom had gone all the way to Stillwater to get at the Salvation Army. It was the first and last normal Christmas that we ever had – at least that I could remember – and I was happy to see that tree and that everything was basically back to normal.

We were sitting on the floor and Mom was cutting cards out of red construction paper and I was in charge of doing all the gluing. I had a bottle of Elmer's and my job was to stick on the picture – the one of me and Mom in front of the tree – and then spread some glue around the edges and put on the green glitter. It was hard to get the glitter exactly where I wanted it to go, though, and sometimes I'd get it on the picture and it would smear across the front and Mom would laugh which I didn't appreciate that much only that time I didn't care. I was just glad to be there and not out on my own anymore.

“How many of these are we doing?” I asked.

“We’ve got thirty-two,” she said. “For everyone down at the Co-op and at church and everyone in my group.”

“What group?”

She just laughed and handed me another piece of construction paper.

“Christmas cards are important,” she said. “People think everything’s okay when you send them Christmas cards. Only upright people have the time to do something like that. Especially handmade cards. No one’s got time to make cards when they’ve got problems.”

I didn’t really need any reason to be making the cards, I was just happy to be there with her and have something to do that didn’t revolve around being scared or trying not to be scared with the Holy Ghost only I sort of felt bad about that on account of Christmas being a religious holiday and everything for the most part. *Gremlins* was playing on the TV and I could hear the whirring noise that our VCR would make after about half of a movie and Mom was sort of bobbing her head and humming some song I didn’t recognize and trying her hardest to cut on the lines which she’d drawn on with a ruler and a black marker. I decided maybe it was the perfect time to ask her some questions that had been bothering me that I couldn’t ask her when she was all tweaked out and not paying attention to me or cleaned up but crying all the time and acting crazy and hurting herself.

“Why’d you tell me that PaPa was dead when he wasn’t?” She just cut the construction paper like I hadn’t asked a thing. “And come to think of it, why didn’t you ever tell me that he died? I mean, I know he didn’t *actually* die, but how come you never told me when he fake died? Why’d you just wait until after the fact and then say he was dead?” She handed me another square but I didn’t paste anything onto it. “How come PaPa said *you*

were dead? How come you gave him so much trouble all those years? How come you never really explained anything to me but just left me to figure things out?”

The more questions I asked her the more it felt like I wasn't even in the room and the angrier I got and I tried to tell myself not to be such a jerk on account of the fact that I should've been happy just to be there but I couldn't seem to help but feel mad as hell.

“Why'd you quit pasting?” She looked at me and giggled. She was wearing a red skirt with this white top and a necklace that looked like it was supposed to be a wreath and I noticed that her hair was actually kind of pretty when it was actually washed and trimmed and everything and I felt good again for a second but I just couldn't get over the fact that she didn't care enough to answer my questions and so I stood up over her and yelled at her but she just kept on cutting those stupid Christmas cards that we never actually got around to sending out anyway. She looked up at me and I noticed that she was crying and I was about to try to make her feel better by giving her a hug or something, which is what I'm used to doing, when she started laughing at me. She started laughing and pointing and then screaming and something sort of jerked inside of me and I reached down and grabbed the scissors out of her hand and jammed them right in the side of her neck where that bobcat'd let that jackrabbit have it and she screamed even louder and stood up and ran out the front door and slammed it behind her.

I started feeling awful guilty after that on account of stabbing my own mother and I wasn't sure if I should go and save her or just live in that house forever without her and the same jerky feeling that made me stab her came over me again and I ran to the door only when I got outside there was a porch which we never had – only a couple of cinderblock steps – and when I turned around I realized it wasn't our house at all but that farmhouse out

back of PaPa's house only PaPa's house wasn't anywhere to be seen. Someone started banging on the window from the inside and when I realized it was Mom and she still had those scissors in her neck and there was blood pouring everywhere I just felt sick to my stomach and I tried to open the door only it was locked and the doorknob was so hot it burned my hand. I heard something roaring on the inside then like the stove when you turn it on and I saw that the inside of the house was on fire.

“Help, Goose! Help!”

She kept banging on the window as the flames came up on her and the curtains and I tried to open the window but my arms felt heavy again and I couldn't do anything to get it open or to make anything stop and I realized that I'd ruined a perfectly good thing and when I looked back in the window, Mom was gone again and the whole house was burning and I could feel the heat on my face and I backed up slowly until I felt nothing and I fell off the front porch and felt my head hit the ground.

I didn't really have any sense of time then, so I don't know exactly how long I laid there on the ground, but when I finally got the strength to sit back up, I was out behind Henry's trailer and the bobcat was gone and everything seemed to be okay except that it was dark and I didn't know what time it was. I looked back across the river and about that time a flash of lighting struck and I noticed that there were a couple of deer standing there where the bobcat had been. One was a doe and the other looked like her baby and the young one was sniffing at the jackrabbit, which for some reason the bobcat had just left there by the side of the river. Thunder came pretty quick after the lightning and then another flash of lightning and the doe got pretty skittish and noticed me sitting there and the two of them ran off and over the hill.

I hadn't noticed a storm coming in earlier and I was worried it was going to start raining so I started looking around for someplace I could maybe stay dry and that's when I noticed there was something or someone lying in that grave we'd illegally dug for Henry's grandma a month or so before. After looking at it a while I was pretty sure it was a person and its arms and legs were shaking real crazy like they were in the middle of getting electrocuted or something and my first instinct was to get up and try to save them – I wasn't thinking at the time how scary it was that someone was in the old lady's grave – but as soon as I tried to get up and help them I felt something pulling back on me. I could feel whatever it was under my arms and it was hot and rough and sort of cutting me and when it reached all the way around my belly I could see that it was the branches of a tree or something like that.

Rain started coming down with the lightning and the dirt under me started turning into mud and after a while a couple more of those tree branches were wrapped around my shoulders, too, and as soon as they had me up against the trunk of the tree another one slithered up – they were moving just like snakes – and wrapped around my neck and a couple more wrapped around my legs and one even made its way right up the middle and over my crotch. They just kept slithering like that until I couldn't move an inch of my body except for my eyes and mouth and when I was all bound up they started to get thicker, too, like they were growing right in front of my eyes and I remembered what it was like to feel like I was getting pulled down to the center of the world.

Lightning hit again and it looked for a second like the person in the grave was gone – all you could see were the rain drops bouncing off of the puddle and the reflection of the moon in the middle – but then a head came up from underneath the water and then a pair of shoulders and the whole body came straight out like they'd been standing under the water

that whole time just waiting for the right time to scare the life out of me and when they were finally completely out of the water and took a step out onto the bank I noticed they didn't have feet at all only hooves and then I really realized what I was in the middle of. There was this crazy boom which meant that the lightning was hitting pretty close and I felt the ground kind of shake and if the boom wasn't enough proof lightning started hitting all around us real fast like one of those electric balls I seen at school that gets all electric and crazy when you put your hands on it.

All the new light shown on her and even though it shouldn't have surprised me I realized it was Henry's grandma only without the oxygen tank and the tube in her nose and with hooves for feet and I knew right then that that was the last time I ever wanted to see a naked old lady if there was another time. Her tits were real flat and her nipples were dark blue and these dark blue veins ran all over her whole body, which was just as wrinkly as her face had been when I'd seen her last. She sort of lurched forward with this crazy smile on her face and when I realized she was walking towards me I tried to get away again but those tree branches just hugged tighter and when they moved they sort of rattled like a rattlesnake. When she was getting pretty close to me, though, she stopped right where she was and leaned over and put her hands on her knees and her flat old tits sort of hung down and she started coughing. I guess smoking will kill you even when you're dead or when the Deer Woman has taken over your body to get revenge for you. That's what it was, I figured. She'd treated me right and let me stay with her and I broke into her house and stole all Henry's money and basically killed her. I knew that was going to come back and bite me pretty bad but in a way I was okay with it because it's better to get it done with sometimes than have to walk around feeling guilty all the time.

She kept coughing and heaving and gagging and the rain kept coming down and I noticed that the Cimarron was starting to rush a little faster and the banks were starting to shrink a bit and when I looked for the old grave I didn't see it no more, only water rushing over everything. You couldn't even see her hooves anymore. She kept hacking and coughing and finally threw her head back and opened up her mouth and there was something white inside that I couldn't quite make out but as soon as she coughed again and it all came out at once and started piling up at her feet I knew exactly what it was: all those broken Precious Moments. I thought it'd be over quick but she kept hacking and coughing up broken white pieces for what felt like forever and there was a pile on the ground so high that it looked like a miniature mountain that came up to her waist. The river was still rising, too, and it was starting to fill in around my waist and even though I was scared out of my mind the whole time, for the first time I started getting scared that maybe I wasn't going to make it out of my so-called fast alive.

When she was done coughing she dropped down on all fours and looked at me and her eyes were black – even blacker than Mom and Dad's when they're tweaking – and she smiled at me and didn't have any teeth and I sort of smiled back like to tell her I didn't mean her no harm or anything and then she started shaking. Not like she'd been shaking in her grave but like a sort of twisting, like a dog does when it's wet and it wants to dry off, only water wasn't flying off of her – her old nasty skin was. She shook until every last bit of her had fallen off which you'd think would be a pretty sick thing to see except that every time a piece of her hit the water it turned into water itself and just sort of made a splash that you couldn't tell from all the rain falling down.

She stood back upright and it was just the same old Deer Woman I'd seen in Dad's motel room not too long before that and as crazy as it sounds I was sort of not that sad to see her. After all, she was a friendly face. That good feeling was gone pretty quick though on account of the rising water and what I remembered of her skull head and that nasty kiss she'd given me and without me even thinking of it my lips were sealed tight. She got right up to where my feet were and the roots and branches that had me pinned down started turning into snakes and twisting up her legs and between her legs and turning back into branches and then we were both basically stuck in the branches, about to go under water together.

Everything was happening so fast that I never stopped to think that maybe I'd be okay like I was last time or that it was all supposed to happen that way. Luke saw Vader in the cave, after all, and Jesus had to fight with the devil when he was out in the desert, so it made sense that if I was going to end up a prophet that I'd have to go through some things myself. Besides just being hungry out of my mind. At the time, though, none of that even crossed my mind. Half of me was scared out of my mind and the other half of me still felt paralyzed like when I tried to help that jackrabbit and couldn't. She leaned forward like and got down on all fours again and her nipples were hanging just above the water and as much as I didn't want to think about it, I couldn't help but think that hers looked much nicer than Henry's grandma's and my stomach twisted up again and even though I wanted to throw up part of me wanted to kiss her again. Part of me wanted her to stick her tongue down my throat again – only that time I was going to let it go all the way and fill up all my insides, and the branches would force us together so that neither of us could get free and the water would go up and we'd go down together to the middle of the earth where I could be inside of her and she could be inside of me and it made me tingle all over to think about her that way and to

think about all the dark mysteries she knew and how she'd put them all inside of me so that I'd know them and not be afraid and she'd protect me.

I groaned, and when I did she smiled. I tried to lean my head forward to get to her and when I did the roots and branches around my neck and head let go and my head jerked forward and I could taste the water, which was up around my neck and the lightning flashed again and I could see how close I was to her face, which wasn't ugly or turning into a skull or nothing, but when I tried to kiss her she slapped me across the face real hard like when Mom used to when I was young and I'd sass her.

"I told you to kill him," she said.

I was still sort of in a stupor so I ignored her and leaned forward, only she slapped me again.

"I told you to kill him and you didn't. Now *they're* going to have to kill him."

"I'm sorry," I said. But I wasn't on account of me not really knowing what she was talking about.

Her meanness went away and a smile came back on her face.

"What are you doing out here?"

I was so happy to see her happy again that I reached for her and when I did the branches let me go, only they didn't *really* let me go – they just guided my arms around her and pulled on me so that they were helping pull her up in my lap. They tightened back up again and she smiled and the water went up over our heads and just like that we were at the bottom of the Cimarron and it was completely dark except for when the lighting flashed up over our heads. She sort of let out a moan and I wondered how I could hear her seeing as we were under water and all and I told her I loved her more than anyone in the world and I

realized that we weren't really talking but like talking with our minds. She pressed her body up against mine and I prayed that the branches would pull even tighter so I could feel every bit of her.

“What are you doing out here?”

“I'm fasting,” I told her. “So I can get the Spirit and become a prophet.”

She laughed and I could feel her body squirming all over every inch of mine and my head and my crotch throbbed and I thought I might pass out.

“You don't need to do that,” she said. “You're a sinner just like everyone else. Just trying to take care of yourself in a world full of other sinners. You're just like they are.”

The only part of that that didn't bother me was the fact that I didn't want to go home – I just wanted to drown right there with her and sink to the bottom of the world.

“Just go home,” she said.

I reached around the back of her head and pulled it in and closed my eyes and kissed her and I could feel that snake trying to go inside of me only I just let it that time. We sat like that for I don't know how long only after a while something started to feel cold – like ice cold – and when I realized it was my hands I opened my eyes and saw that I was kissing Henry's grandma, who looked like she was dead and her eyes were wide open and staring at me only they were completely white and dead looking and I started to scream only not in my head but with my real voice and I felt the water rush inside and I started to choke. The tree roots and branches were all gone and Henry's grandma started to float up to the top of the water, which was way over my head now and over the tops of all the trees and she just kept floating up with her arms and legs all drifting in their own directions and the lighting flashing over the top of the water. I was still choking and I started swimming as hard as I could and

when I finally got to the surface and came up for air there was water as far as I could see in every direction, like I was in the middle of the ocean or something. There wasn't a star in the sky, neither, only lightning. After a while I got tired of swimming and I turned on my back and just laid there, floating, wondering how long I could stay alive.

When I woke up it was raining and the Cimarron was starting to creep up and get my shoes wet. Before I even knew what I was doing, I was on my feet and looking for somewhere to run. I didn't know why I wanted to run or where I was going to run to, so I was sort of just standing there, walking in circles, trying to take in everything that had happened and trying to make some kind of sense of it. Without even having to think about it, I wandered over to Mrs. Ruach's old grave and looked down inside to see if the Deer Woman was there or something, only she wasn't. The only thing there was my reflection and I could hear her voice saying to me, "you got evil in you, just like them," and even though I wasn't entirely sure what that meant I remembered for sure what had happened and I remembered how I wanted her inside of me and how I wanted to stay with her forever in the center of the earth.

She'd wanted me to go home, and so I knew that that was not really an option on account of me being pretty for sure that she was some kind of test and if I did what she wanted that I'd fail and I wouldn't get the Spirit and be the one that saved everyone even though I was starting to think that was maybe about the last thing in the world that I actually wanted. I was pretty much scared out of my mind so I knew I couldn't stay there on my own and I couldn't go home, neither, and that's when it hit me that I still had somewhere else I could go: Henry. After all, he always knew what to do and had some kind of wisdom about

what was the good Christian thing to do and even if he didn't believe in the Holy Ghost like I did I pretty much had no choice on account of going back to PaPa basically being just the thing that the devil wanted me to do. And if I've learned anything it's that sometimes you got to make choices that may not be the best in the end, but at least you're not choosing the devil.

Thinking of Henry kind of put some new energy in me and I'd run all the way to town before my body reminded me that I hadn't had anything to eat or drink in God knows how long and my legs sort of gave out on me. I didn't mind, though. The Love House was close and maybe since I'd done the right thing and not listened to the Deer Woman – even though I had basically given into her and my urges, which were feeling stronger and stronger the more I thought about them – maybe I could quit fasting and eat. Although I was pretty sure I had to have the Spirit before I could eat and I didn't think I really had it even though I wasn't entirely sure what it would feel like when it happened.

I never stopped to think what I was actually going to do when I got to Henry's home, so I was a little scared when I got there and all of the lights were out. I couldn't just go beating on the door for someone to let me in – they'd of called PaPa on me for sure. So I snuck around the back of the house and looked for a way in back there. The place had a pretty big backyard and I felt sort of bad because there was this long laundry line out there and it had clothes all up and down it and it was still raining pretty bad so everything was soaking wet. What's the point of putting slow people in a home if there's not going to be no one there to talk sense into them about things like leaving your laundry out on the line? Even Mom remembered to bring in laundry, when we had it, and she was tweaked out of her mind half the time. Maybe more.

I tried the back door, which was basically just a screen door on a big porch, but it was locked. It was only one of those old-fashioned hook locks, though, so it only took a twig I found in the grass to get the thing opened. It was just like I expected though: the inside backdoor was locked tight. It was dry on the back porch, though, and they had this big, comfy, swinging bench and a bunch of red potted flowers of some sort and I was sort of tempted to just curl up and go to sleep. I thought maybe when I woke up Henry would be there and he'd have a big omelet full of sausage and bacon and cheese ready for me. It was stupid thinking, though, on account of anyone that knows Henry knows he's not good enough a cook to make an omelet. Pretty much all he's good at is a peanut butter sandwich.

Water was pouring out of the downspout when I put my foot on it to see if it could hold my weight. I knew Henry was up on the top floor and if I could just get up on the roof over the back porch, I could knock on his window maybe and wake him up. The thought of seeing that old woman with the crazy eyes sort of gave me the willies, though, and I told myself that if I could deal with the Deer Woman that I could deal with her. It's different, though, with flesh and blood. Ghosts and such can scare you, but a person can put his hands on you and take you places you don't want to go. My first time up the gutter I didn't make it to the roof and I fell off. I landed in the bushes at the bottom of the house and didn't realize they were rose bushes until I had an armful of thorns and scratches.

I closed my eyes and said a little prayer to get me up that downspout and I picked a thorn out of my elbow and made a run for it so that maybe my own body would get me up it, which sort of worked, and for a while there I was just hanging by the gutter, hoping it weren't going to fall off and take me with it back down into those rosebushes. The metal was cutting into my hand pretty bad and I was pretty tired still from all my fasting but

somehow I managed to swing myself up on that roof and I just laid there looking up at the rain falling down on me for what felt like an hour before I had the strength to get up. And when I did get up I got the creepiest feeling I'd ever had in my whole life – and I've seen some creepy things. There were just two windows upstairs and they were both staring out at me like a pair of eyes. The only thing was that they were both totally black and there wasn't anyone in either of them but for some reason the fact that there *wasn't* no one in them made them scarier. It was like the not knowing was the worst part. Maybe someone was watching me and maybe someone wasn't – but right then it felt like the whole universe was staring down my neck from every possible point.

I tried my best to shake the feeling off and I went right to the window on the left even though I wasn't entirely sure which window it was. I crouched down with my eyes right over the sill and tried my hardest to look inside but I couldn't see anything. I was about to give up on that idea when lightning crashed again and lit up the whole room and I could see an empty bed on one side that was all made up with a red quilt and another bed on the other side of the room with a man too long for the bed itself and I figured it must've been Henry and his roommate must've been working late at the Wal-Mart in Stillwater like Henry said he did. I knocked a little on the window but Henry didn't budge. I didn't want to knock much harder so I tried to open the window myself only it was locked. I'd never met anyone in Cimarron that kept their place so locked down. I gave it one more hard knock but he didn't budge.

I turned around and sat down on the roof with my back against the house next to the window and tried my hardest not to cry on account of having already done it enough already that summer to last a lifetime. I thought about how it was pretty stupid to try to break into Henry's room even though it was basically my last option in the world and I thought about

how nice it would be to chat with Henry and catch up and maybe get something to eat and like smooth over our problems about the Holy Ghost and maybe even get back out on our own together. Around that time the rain started to let up and everything started getting sticky and the clouds sort of started to move away and you could see some of the stars. I love looking out at the stars because they're like basically the only thing that can really make me feel small or whatever, and when I feel small I feel safe because I don't have to worry about being big. And by being big I mean looking out after myself and worrying about pretty much everything which lately had come to mean not only me but my whole family and whoever else out there God might want me to save.

I don't really know much about constellations or astrology or anything like that, but space just sort of gets to me, if you know what I mean. It's so black you can sort of get lost in it, and even though there are tons of stars and even satellites and sometimes just airplanes getting in the way, you know they're so far away that they'll never *really* get in your way. Most kids want to be astronauts when they grow up at some point, but with me it sort of always stuck. I mean, I basically still want to be an astronaut even though I know I probably won't ever be one on account of the fact that I'm basically a drop-out or a flunky at best. There's just something about being in space: it's not the getting away from this world that's so appealing – it's the getting closer to some other world – it's being able to float and be as close as any person has ever been before to both nothing and everything at the same time. It's that feeling – of nothing and everything at the same time – that I get every time I stare at the night sky. I'm not just your typical dumb kid that only thinks about other planets and UFO's and the stuff I read about in the *Star Wars* books – although don't get me wrong, I'm pretty into that, too. I know there's something real there, too. I just don't know what it is.

I was basically out of options – especially seeing as Henry was really my only last option and I started thinking about how the Deer Woman had basically told me that I had hate inside me, too, and that I'd never get rid of it and I wondered if maybe I should just go home to Mom and PaPa and forget about trying to save them and just try live a normal life, which is basically the best anyone can hope for anyway. Maybe I was stupid for thinking that I could do all that stuff anyway or that God had some kind of special mission for a dropout, runaway, flunky like me to begin with. Don't get me wrong – I was definitely aware of all that prodigal son stuff and how God liked messed up people even more than normal people. I just wasn't sure if I liked messed up people more than normal people myself. After all, messed up people had pretty much gotten me soaking wet and sitting up on the roof of The Love House in the middle of the night. Around that time four yellow squares appeared on the roof next to me and I realized the light was on in Henry's room.

The grit on the shingle cut into my hands on account of how fast I was up and on my feet. I didn't knock yet only looked inside where I saw a fat old man with a beard and glasses and Velcro shoes and a blue Wal-Mart vest waving his hands around in the air like he was telling the most interesting story in the world to Henry, who was now sitting up in his bed and rubbing his eyes and not looking very interested. While he was telling his story, the fat guy took off all of his clothes and I had to look away on account of the fact that if there's one thing in the world that makes me feel more uncomfortable in the world, it's looking at a fat, hairy guy get naked. Especially a retarded one that doesn't know you're looking. When I looked back he had a towel on and was holding a toothbrush and a razor and I was wondering which part of his body he was going to use it on when he walked out the door. That's when I

started tapping on the glass pretty hard and it didn't take Henry long to get himself over to the window and to get it open.

“Goose?”

“Here I am, Henry.”

I jumped down inside his bedroom and first thing he crossed the room and locked the door and then came back over and tried to act like he was real concerned even though I could tell that he was pretty glad to see me on account of the smiles he was holding back.

“What are you doing here?” he asked me. “You can't be in here. We'll both get in a heap of trouble.”

“I come to get you out of here,” I told him. “I'm on my own again and I come to get you on your own with me.”

“You're all wet. Why are you all wet?”

“I been out in the rain, dummy.”

He took a step back and looked me over once more and then he finally let out that smile he'd been holding back and gave me a hug which felt weird since he wasn't wearing a shirt and I was still feeling sort of weird about seeing that fat man's naked body.

“Get a shirt on,” I said. “We got to get out of here.”

I was expecting he'd throw up more of a fight and all about leaving on account of him usually being the one with common sense and concern for the future and all that kind of stuff but as soon as I said let's go he grabbed a sock full of something out from underneath his bed and put on a pair of tennis shoes that looked like they were new since he'd started living there and I wondered for a second if was a bad idea to bust him out of there on account of him getting new shoes and not having it that bad there. I remembered how much he

complained about it the last time that I saw him, though, and the smile he had on his face made me feel a little better, too, and I told myself I'd be glad to get out, too, if there was some fat naked man always coming into my room at late hours and telling boring stories about Wal-Mart and generally not shaving anything in his body. I'd want out of there fast, and I'm a pretty patient person.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“What's in the sock?” I asked him.

“I got some more change since everything else I collected got taken. I been picking change up around the house here. No one likes it but I check the couch cushions every day. Got twelve dollars and thirty-eight cents now. Ought to be enough for us for a while anyway. Where are we going?”

“Out the window.”

When I said that he laughed so hard he snorted and about that time I heard fatso trying to get the door open and he started hollering for Henry to let him in and how it wasn't funny and all that and so we split as fast as we could. I couldn't believe it but when Henry got out on the roof he just jumped down on the ground and so I followed him and when I hit the ground rolling I ran right into him and he wrapped his arm around my neck and we laughed for a few seconds and even though he kept asking me where we were going and I didn't know, I was happy to be with him again.

We passed the Co-op and crossed Main Street and cut behind the First Baptist Church. It wasn't raining anymore and even though it was still dark you could tell the morning was almost there because the birds were starting to come out and make noises and things were starting to stir so I knew we had to get out of there fast. The light was on in the

Donut Stand and there was a car already parked at the Hair Cottage and as we were walking past everywhere it sort of blew my mind that there was this whole town out there that I sort of knew but was never really a part of. I guess that's why they call people like us trash – on account of us never sticking – though it's not very nice or whatever. Even if it is true.

We walked in silence, just happy to be together, across the place out on 33 on the other side of Main from the motel and the Whistle Stop and that place that sells junk and statues for your yard like the Virgin Mary and gnomes and windmills and gravestones. Right then, me and Henry would have been fine right there, living amongst the statues, but I sort of wanted more, like a place of our own where we could start everything over again and not do anything illegal to mess it up like try to bury a body or something. It kind of occurred to me then that I did know a place where we could stay, even if it wasn't technically ours and even if it was dangerously close to PaPa's – which was one place I definitely didn't want to be – and for a second everything seemed like it was going to be alright, even though I knew in my heart that it probably wasn't. I'd basically just gotten used to that idea by then.

“I know a farmhouse where we can lay low until we get things figured out,” I said.

Henry just smiled.

“I'm hungry,” I said.

“I got some money,” he said. “I got the money to take care of you.”

I was awful glad to hear that but thinking about being hungry reminded me that I was supposed to be on a mission and that reminded me that Henry thought I was basically full of it and I decided right there that I had to get all that ironed out if we were going to live together and be a team or a family or whatever you call it.

“I got something I need to tell you,” I said. “I’m fasting right now. And I don’t care if you care or not. I’m waiting on the Holy Ghost to fill me up so I can get to saving us and my family and starting to speak the Word. When I get the Spirit, none of my words are going to hit the ground and you’re going to know that I was right. Or maybe I won’t. I haven’t decided yet. Maybe I won’t be a prophet, even if I’m supposed to. Or maybe I’m not no prophet at all. Maybe PaPa was wrong. But until then I’m fasting and you better leave me alone about it.”

Just as soon as I said it like that I regretted being so harsh and everything but just like always Henry was cool.

“I got it,” he said. “I guess I should of said something already anyway. I’m sorry I got all messed up about it last time. I’m sorry. You got your relationship with the Lord and I got mine. As long as we both got one I’ll be fine.”

Part of me didn’t like him being like that and I sort of burned on account of him always being so easy to forgive. It didn’t matter what I did: I could lie to him about Linda Cavanaugh or steal his money or kill his grandma or talk in tongues or tell him he was wrong and he’d just say “it’s okay, Goose.” Where’s the right in that? I guess I’d rather be mad about him being so easy to forgive sometimes, though, than have to ever deal with him actually mad. To tell the truth, he was one of the only people that weren’t always mad at me about something and I guess you got to love that about him. I let it go and took it as a good sign for our new life, whether I was going to end up being a part of a big mission or not.

We kept on down 33 towards PaPa’s and the stars eventually went away and the sky started to light up white even though the sun wasn’t out and the cars started coming more and more and when they did we’d jump in the ditch and watch until they were out of sight.

We cut back down to the river when we got close to PaPa's so we could come up on the farmhouse from behind and no one would see us. When we got down there I couldn't help but think about how I'd almost drowned in that river and how the Deer Woman had almost taken me with her forever and I was basically bursting at the seams to tell Henry all about it even though part of me didn't want to tell him about anything that would make him think I was crazier than he did already. I mean, he said no worries about the tongues and everything and the fight we got in, but I'm not sure forgive means to forget. As we walked up to the back door of the house I was starting to lay out a plan about what I was going to do.

I was going to tell Henry everything – I mean *everything* in the exact order it happened and see what he thought no matter how crazy it might've seemed and then me and him were going to sort it out together and figure out what I needed to do next to get my big mission back on track. I might've been just looking out for me and Henry again, but I didn't think the Spirit was the sort of thing you can just drop. Once it gets inside of you it starts to take root and there's nothing you can do about that. Who doesn't want to believe they got some sort of purpose in their life?

I swung open the back door and Henry went on in front of me and before I could even look around and see where I was at I felt a pretty wicked thump on the back of my head and everything flashed white and I could feel myself falling and falling and I reached out for Henry but he wasn't there. The only thing I found was the floor, which reached right up and caught me in the eye. That's when everything went black and nothing was the same again after that.

Chapter 23

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was that it was light out and that my hands were tied up or something behind my back and all I could taste was dirt which didn't make sense on account of me not remembering falling over in any dirt or anything, but then I realized it was coming from the dust and stuff that was all over the wood floor I was on. When I sat up the left side of my head throbbed pretty hard and even though I couldn't feel it since my hands were tied up and I couldn't see it I could tell that that my face was pretty swollen up on account of the tingly feeling I had right under my skin.

By the looks of it I was in what used to be the old place's bathroom. I didn't see Henry anywhere but there was somebody lying in this old bathtub that was standing up on the ground on these wicked looking birds feet that had these big claws. There were just a couple of feet hanging out one end so I couldn't tell who it was but I was pretty sure it wasn't Henry since they weren't wearing tennis shoes like Henry but these black cowboy boots that looked pretty familiar. It was a narrow room with nothing in it but the tub and it was dark, too, except for the sunlight coming in the window at the end of the room.

I could hear footsteps outside of the door and sometimes these voices and I tried to listen as hard as I could but I couldn't understand what they were saying and I definitely didn't hear Henry's voice. I hoped like hell that he got away and even though I didn't know what exactly was happening I knew it was probably not going to end good and if it something happened to Henry it would basically be my fault on account of me being the one that busted him out of the Love House in the first place. What kind of plan was that anyway? Looking back it just sort of seemed like I was scared and alone and I wanted somebody to be scared and alone with me, which in the end is pretty selfish.

The footsteps came closer to the door and I could see shadows through the crack under the door and I could finally make out what exactly they were saying.

"We ought to kill them now and get out of here. We've been here too long," one of them said.

"We'll get out soon enough," the other voice said. "But we're not going to kill them just yet. First we're going to have some fun."

The door handle rattled and somebody came in the room and I closed my eyes and pretended like I was still out cold.

"Pete's still out."

"What about the boy?"

I felt the edge of a boot nudge me in the stomach.

"He's out, too."

I don't know how he thought I was out – I was breathing like a madman and my blood was pumping so hard you probably could've seen my throat jumping for the ceiling. If I could've just cracked one eyelid I would've been fine, even if I couldn't see anything, but

there's something about lying there in the dark, not knowing what's going to happen, not knowing what you're even supposed to be scared of, that's about the scariest thing you can experience in this life. When I felt the tip of that boot in my stomach I nearly puked. After they were done talking he walked out of the room and I heard him shut the door behind him.

I was still starving and dying of thirst from the fast and I waited what felt like about a thousand years before I opened my eyes back up and got back to thinking about what to do. If I could've got my hands untied I probably could've made it out that window and high-tailed it for PaPa's. But there was Henry to think about. I just wished I'd known what happened to him. If I knew that he'd gotten out I would've been wasting my time staying around on his account but if I ran and left him there I didn't think I'd ever be able to forgive myself. Either way it was awful torturous on account of PaPa's house being not three hundred feet away. It seems like every time I get in trouble I'm right under the world's nose and no one ever seems to notice.

It took me a while to get up on my knees and when I did all the blood poured to my face and my skin tingled again and a headache came on like a flash of lightning and I had to bite the inside of my lip until it bled to keep my mind off the pain. The blood tasted salty and as soon as I swallowed it the pain went away like my own blood was the antidote and when my head was cleared I crawled on my knees over to the bathtub and looked down inside. I should've known it. You couldn't tell by his face because it was beaten black and blue all over and there was dried blood all over his forehead and around his mouth, but the white hair was a dead giveaway: it was Dad. And if it was Dad, I figured there was probably a pretty good chance that the men stomping around out in the hallway in their boots were the Goodwin brothers.

He had an orange extension cord wrapped around his neck pretty tight and one around his wrists, too, and his skin was white as flour where it wasn't bruised or covered in dried-up blood and I wondered for a second if he was dead but after a while I noticed his chest was moving and I could tell he was breathing.

“Wake up,” I said, only I whispered it. I wasn't sure exactly why I wanted him to be awake, to be honest, only I was scared out of my mind and wanted someone to talk to and I thought maybe he'd know something I didn't like why he was there and why the Goodwin brothers were there or what had happened to Henry. On top of all that he was my dad, after all. I butted him as hard as I could with my head and he sat forward all of a sudden and started coughing and I was real nervous that they were going to hear him so I shushed him as quiet as I could. He opened up his eyes and looked right at me but I had to look away because the whites of his eyes were all red like the blood vessels had broken or something and it sort of made me sick to look at.

“Goose? What are you doing here?”

I forced myself to look at him again and I noticed that I could see the color of his eyes for the first time since I met him and it turned out that he was right: he had blue eyes just like me.

“What are *you* doing here?”

He was smart enough to whisper but his voice sounded funny like he was caught somewhere between happy and scared out of his mind and he slung his tied up hands over my neck and pulled and before I knew it I was in the bathtub with him and lying down on top of him and his chest was heaving pretty hard and I could tell he was crying and I was scared they were going to see us but happy to be next to a warm body, whoever's it was, at the same

time. He started kissing me on the cheeks and the forehead and all over which I hated on account of my face hurting pretty bad but I let him do it anyway seeing as he'd been there longer than me and was probably happy just to see someone. And after all, I was his son.

“What are you doing here?”

“Me and Henry came here to hide out for a while and to lay low and figure out what our next move was going to be and then I got hit on the head and now I'm here.”

“How'd you know about this place? I saw you out in the yard a while back and I tried to holler at you to get some help or something but you just left. You staying with your PaPa?”

I nodded.

“I owed them money. They found me. And Curly T. He's dead. They kept me alive because I told them I knew of a place where we could hide out. Me and your Mom used to come back here when we were in high school and –” He didn't say much after that.

“Wait. You mean that was you that was hollering at me? You been here that long?”

He nodded. I'd seen Dad pretty messed up back when we were living in the motel and cooking meth and selling it, but I hadn't seen him look nowhere near as bad as he was then. He was skinnier than I'd ever seen him and he had this look on his face like he'd seen the dead get up out of their graves and walk around. Like the fiery end was coming and no one knew it but him. He started to cry again and squeezed on me pretty tight and I just let him do it even though I was having a hard time breathing.

“I'm sorry I made you steal your friend's money,” he told me. “I lost it anyway. Someone stole it. I was tweaked out of my mind and someone stole it. I don't know who.

But that's how I got in all this mess. I was supposed to turn that money into six grand, which is what I owe them."

"The Goodwin brothers?"

He nodded and then his face got bright like he had the best idea in the world.

"Hey, you know where I can get six grand?"

I heard a loud crack in the room and I realized that someone had thrown open the door.

"What the fuck are you two faggots doing?" The voice was deep and sounded scratchy like Dad's so I could tell he was a smoker only I couldn't actually see him on account of me being face down in Dad's chest. "Hey Johnny, come get a load of this. These two faggots are trying to get it on in the bathtub." He laughed so hard he sort of sounded like he was howling and when he came in the room I could hear him dragging something pretty heavy across the floor and when he got in front of me I could see that he was wearing white sweatpants and he didn't have a shirt on and he was pretty muscular like a movie star or a body builder and his hair was dark but pretty short like it'd been shaved pretty recently and he had a gun tucked into underwear, which you could see because the sweatpants were sort of falling down when he turned around I noticed he had these huge sideburns that were way thicker than his actual hair and that his whole chest was covered with this giant cross that was on fire and the thing he was dragging was a body. When he stepped towards me and out of the way of the body, which he'd propped up under the only window, I could see that it was Henry, only his face was blacker than me and Dad's put together.

"What are you doing in there, you little faggot?"

He reached behind his back and pulled the gun out and when he pointed it at me I recognized it as Dad's gun. I rolled over on my back so I could see him and when he did that he pointed the barrel at me, only he was sort of waving it around. I glanced over at Henry but I couldn't tell whether he was alive or not.

“What are you pissing and moaning about?”

The second brother, who must've been Johnny, showed up in the doorway. He was wearing an orange jumpsuit just like the one I'd seen Henry wearing in Stillwater only the sleeves was rolled all the way up. He wasn't near as big as his brother nor as scary looking but he had this red hair just like mine and a red moustache to match and blue eyes like mine and he had a tattoo, too, only his was on his arm and was like this wicked eagle carrying a funny looking cross that sort of looked like a windmill. I'd seen it on a documentary I'd seen once on a big war and Mom said it was a sign of pure evil. She said that about the Deer Woman, though, too, and right about that time I'd of given anything to be with her instead of these two.

“Look at these two little faggots, taking a bath together,” the big one said.

Right about then Henry let out a mighty heave and then gagged and coughed and enough blood to make a man sick came out of his mouth and poured down all over his chest.

“Hooey!” the big one said. “He's alive!” He looked back at me and steadied the gun. “We had fun with that one –especially when we found out he was a retard. Just looking at him he looks like a real, normal, person, but then he opened his mouth.” He laughed. “Started stuttering and stammering about Jesus Christ and his grandmother and then he started blubbing and crying like a baby.”

Henry heaved again and I could tell he was having a hard time breathing and a sort of hate welled up inside of me like the Deer Woman said it would and I wanted to kill the big one with the gun so bad but all that happened was I let out a sort of whimper and I couldn't tell if I was crying or not until I felt my bruised face prickling again and I could feel the warm liquid running on my neck. The big one laughed again and put the barrel of the gun right at my mouth. When he did that I felt Dad squirm underneath me.

“Don't you point a gun at my son,” he said.

When he said that, the big guy's eyes lit up and Johnny took a step forward.

“You hear that, Frankie? Pete's got a son.”

“And what are the chances of that?” Frankie said. He laughed and all I could think about was how much I wanted to rip out his throat. Before I could do or say anything though he slid the barrel of the gun into my mouth and I could feel the cold metal against the back of my throat and the harder I cried the louder Frankie laughed. He pulled the barrel halfway out and pushed it down again and did that over and over again and laughed like an idiot and I wanted him to die.

“Oh yeah,” Frankie said. “Pete's son likes that faggot sort of stuff.”

“Why do you insist on using that word so much?” Jonny asked. “Get that extension cord off of Pete's neck and tie up the retard. We can't have him working up enough energy to get up.”

Johnny pulled the barrel of the gun out of my mouth so fast that the site on the end caught the backside of one of my front teeth and there was this warm explosion inside my skull or something and all of sudden I could taste blood in my mouth again and when I slid my tongue across the front of my top teeth I felt the one he caught sticking straight out and as

soon as my tongue touched it came right out and I started bleeding more. I spit and you could hear a clink when the tooth hit the inside of the bathtub. Frankie put the gun back in his underwear and picked me up and dropped me on the floor where I'd woken up. Johnny just stood there and watched as Frankie took the extension cord off of Dad's neck and tied Henry's hands up like mine only in front of him and you could definitely tell that Johnny was basically the brains of the operation. Frankie walked back to the door and stood beside his brother and they both looked at us like they were proud of their work or something

“Looky here,” Johnny said, “a retard, a baby, and a junkie! We got ourselves a regular freak show.”

They slammed the door and I could hear them laughing out in the hallway and I burned with hate and tasted blood in my mouth and thought about how it was all sort of my fault and I cried.

Chapter 24

I was thirsty as hell and my stomach was hurting pretty bad but to be honest I didn't really notice it ton account of my face and head being pretty messed up and me being scared out of my mind and I started to learn that PaPa was right and that there were more important things in the world than eating and drinking and all that. If what I was thinking was true, though, I felt awful bad that Henry had to be mixed up in all of it. It was *my* test, after all.

A day passed with the three of us just lying there, suffering, and when the sun came up on that second day I scooted myself over next to Henry and beneath that window – even though it hurt like hell to move around – and I started elbowing him in the side.

“Wake up, Henry. Get up.” He just sat there with his head hanging down and snoring and so I elbowed him even harder. “Get up!”

He finally woke up, and of all the things in the world he had a smile on his face like he'd just met the president or maybe had a real intense religious experience and he didn't have to wonder if he was wrong about what he believed the rest of his life, which was basically what I was looking for.

“Hey Goose,” he said and then he laughed until he snorted, only it wasn’t like he usually did and when he snorted he kind of choked and his chest started heaving again and then he fell over on his side.

“Get up,” I told him. “We got to get out of here.”

I didn’t have any idea how we were going to do it but I knew we had to figure out something if for no other reason than I couldn’t handle having to say I’m sorry to Henry again and the idea of having to hear him forgive me again just made me feel even more worse. I had enough repenting to do as it was considering the situation I’d already gotten us into.

“We got to get out of here,” I said again. “Get up,” I said one last time only that time I was almost screaming only in a whispery sort of way and it worked and Henry sat back up.

“What are we going to do, Goose?” he asked me. He still had a smile on his face and I did, too, and if you had walked in that room right then and there you’d of thought it was the most messed up thing in the world that we both looked like we were happy in such wicked messed up circumstances. “You on a mission,” he said. “Aren’t you?”

I just ignored him and looked around the room trying to get a plan together.

“Can you get to my hands?”

I bent over so he could see where mine were tied up. He didn’t even say anything. He just leaned forward and started pulling at the rope or whatever had me tied up.

“Why they have so much extension cord?” he asked.

“PaPa leaves it all out on his back porch.”

I heard the doorknob rattle and I fell over and pretended to be out of it but Henry kept on rooting and digging at the knots around my hand. The door opened up and I could hear

Johnny laughing. I opened my eyes and he was standing in the doorway just like he'd been doing the day before only he had an unlit cigarette in his mouth and what looked like a gun in his hand which he slowly pulled upwards and pointed at us and both me and Henry flinched like we was the same person. He laughed and pointed the gun at the end of his cigarette and pulled the trigger but there was only a small click and a flame came out and he lit his cigarette. He sat the gun on the edge of the tub and looked down at Dad who was still unconscious and blew his smoke down in the bathtub and then sat down on the edge and crossed his legs like a girl.

“Don't worry boys,” he said and then took a drag off his cigarette. “I don't carry a gun. Hate guns. *Despise* them, if you want me to be honest.” He took another drag and then tapped his ash out over Dad's body. “I like knives.” He reached behind his back and I was sure he was going to whip one out and do a number on one of us but then I could tell he was just scratching himself and I eased up a bit. “Knives are much more personable to kill someone with. When you kill someone with a knife, you can't be a coward – you have to use the strength God gave you to take the life God gave *them* out. It's an exchange. You have to have a little elbow grease to draw blood. Now my brother – he's into guns. Not a coward, though. Just likes to be efficient. It's not personable for him. He doesn't see any pleasure in it.”

He ashed on Dad again and then blew his smoke straight up in the air like he was trying to be considerate or something. He talked in a pretty polite way and to no one in particular like he was a preacher or just happy to have someone to talk to other than his brother.

“Now, I want you to know that I hate all forms of nigger, Jew, and spic much as the next Christian.” He took one last drag on his cigarette and then, real calm like, put it down somewhere on Dad – I couldn’t see from where I was sitting – and snubbed it out. Dad sort of twitched but didn’t wake up. “But it’s white trash like *this* that I despise more than anyone or anything. Stupid fucking junkies that can’t keep their promises.” He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “We’re under attack, you see. Under attack by the government, by minorities, by liberal atheists. It’s a cultural war, of course, not one of blood and action. But a war nonetheless. And men like your daddy – if that’s what you can call them – are making it worse. After all, if I can’t trust my white brother, in whom can I place my trust?” He picked his arms up and shrugged his shoulders. “Now, you should know, of course, because I want to be honest: we’re going to kill all three of you. We might do Pete here in a bit more painfully, though, seeing as he fucked us over and all. But you’re all going to die.”

I looked at Henry but his eyes were closed and his lips were moving and I knew that he was saying a prayer like the end was sooner than either of us thought so I tried my hardest to appeal to the side of the man that seemed to be pretty nice.

“You know you don’t have to do this,” I told him. “We don’t even know who you are. Even if we did know who you were it wouldn’t matter. You could just leave us here like this all tied up and everything and by the time anyone finds us you two will be clear out of here. You know?” He just laughed. “Listen,” I said. “I don’t care what you done. You don’t have to worry about me being a rat. I’ve basically killed people myself and I know what it’s like to live like a thief and all of that.”

Johnny got up from the side of the tub and stood right in front of Henry and me and squatted down so he was on eye level with us.

“You know, you’re the third person I’ve heard say that,” he told me. “*You don’t have to do this*. What is that? *You don’t have to do this! You don’t have to do this!* The third person, can you believe it? It’s like the people I’ve killed have all gotten their education from the same place: the movies. What a terrible thing to say. *I know* I don’t have to do this.” He got right down in my face and I could smell the cigarette smoke coming off his breath. “*I want* to do this. Don’t you get it?” He laughed again and tossed my hair like I was his nephew and we were at some sort of family get together and when he stood up I looked over and Henry didn’t look like he was with it anymore.

“Looks like your friend prayed himself into a coma,” Johnny said. I didn’t like him making fun of Henry in the way he did and even though I knew it wasn’t a good idea I let out a kick with both my feet only I missed him and just fell on my side with my head in Henry’s lap. Johnny squatted down again and started whispering to me, which I thought was pretty weird since I was the only one in the room conscious enough to hear him or to care.

“The difference between me and your friend here is that we’re not the same kind of Christian, you know? See, we both love Jesus, but I’m smart enough to know that if you love Jesus, you got to love violence. You got to eat his flesh and drink his blood, right? You got to get down on your knees and thank God that some men ripped off his flesh and stabbed him in the side and nailed him to a tree. You got to love that and you got to know that God loves that. *That’s* why I want to kill you, kid. Because I want there to be new life on this earth. That’s the difference between me and your friend here – he pisses and moans and prays for new life. I take action. Remember, kid: if you love your life, you will lose it.”

Right after he said that he reached down and kissed me on the forehead and that's basically when I lost it. I started kicking both my feet in every which direction and screaming and hollering, and the more I screamed and kicked the more I could feel that feeling I had inside of me when the Deer Woman was pressed up against me and I thought about how she'd said that I had hate inside of me like everyone else and right then all I wanted was for that hate to gather up in one place and come out of me and kill Johnny and Frankie Goodwin. I wanted to beat them like they beat me and I imagined myself sitting over Johnny's face and pounding it with my fists until you couldn't even recognize it anymore and the more I punched in my mind the harder I kicked with my legs. Johnny was laughing and before long Frankie was in the doorway laughing, too, and throwing his arms around and doing his best to imitate me. I kicked and cried like that until I passed out. It might've been five minutes or it might've been the rest of the day. They didn't seem to care about all the noise I was making, though, which I took to be a sign that they were getting pretty close to finishing us off for good.

I woke up to a loud metallic thud and even though it was dark out again and one of my eyes was still all swollen shut I could tell from the moonlight coming through the little window above our heads that it was the green gas can that PaPa kept on his back porch and when he moved it around I could hear the gas sloshing around inside and even though it was gasoline the sound of liquid and the thought of cold gasoline drying up on you skin real fast and cooling you off made me thirsty and when I tried to smack my lips I realized my mouth was so dried up it was cracked and bleeding.

Frankie unscrewed the top of the can which made a pretty wicked high pitched squeaking sound on account of all the rust and when the top was off he picked the can up by the bottom and started dumping gasoline on Dad in the bathtub. Dad started to say something but before he could get the words out Frankie started pouring the gas right on his face and all you could hear out of Dad's mouth was gasps for air like he was drowning and around that time Johnny came in and stood me and Henry up and untied us and I was pretty sure that meant it was the end. The whole time the Goodwins didn't say a word or crack a smile or anything, which I'd expected they would, but they were basically all business.

"Go get the gun," Johnny said.

He looked at me and gave me a sort of kind smile and between the gun and the smile I knew he was going to be nice about how he did it and even though I kept saying *all God wants you to do is just survive* over and over in my head to make myself feel a little better it didn't help much and I started to cry a little bit. Johnny put one of his boots up on the edge of the bathtub and pulled out a cigarette and his gun lighter but right before he could light the cigarette Frankie yelled from the other room.

"There's lights up at the house," he yelled. "A cop car. Get out here!"

Johnny let the cigarette and the lighter drop to the floor and as soon as he was out of the room Dad sprung up out of the tub with as much energy as if he'd of just gotten done with a two week vacation or just fallen on some fresh tweak and he grabbed the gas can and started dumping gas all over the bathroom and even though what he was doing seemed scarier and kind of stupid and not like a good idea or whatever I was glad that someone was doing something beside the Goodwin brothers. He bent over and picked up the lighter and looked at me like he knew what I was thinking.

“It’s the only way we’ll get them cops attention.”

He pushed me and Henry back out of the way and I heard a click and a flame came out of the end of the gun. He lowered the gun and before I even knew what was going on half of the room was blazing hot with fire and Dad had already pulled off all of his clothes and was standing naked before the fire.

I sort of wondered why if we had so much free time why we didn’t just climb out the window. Now we had no way out but the way of the Goodwins and in just a couple of minutes the fire had us in the doorway and then out in the hallway. Henry was up front for some reason and Dad was behind him shoving him which was a bad idea on account of Henry being the last guy you want leading you through a burning house full of armed escaped convicts, and I was in the back wondering how the cops were going to notice the fire if Johnny and Frankie hadn’t even noticed it but around that time Frankie showed up at the front of the hallway with his gun and I knew we were in for it then. I looked behind me and saw the hallway didn’t go nowhere but what looked like a bedroom in the back.

“What’d you do?” Frankie asked. That kind of surprised me to be honest and the next couple minutes were the strangest that’s ever passed, I think. Frankie just sat there and you could tell he was starting to sweat pretty bad because his forehead was starting to reflect the fire which was getting pretty hot on my backside and I kept crowding Dad who was crowding Henry who had the gun pointed right at him. “What’d you do?” he asked again. His voice was shaky and he had this sad look in his eyes like his best friends had betrayed. The smoke was coming out pretty bad now and it was getting hard to see but in that last second before everything started getting crazy I looked into Frankie’s eyes and it looked like he was crying.

For a second everything got still except the crackle of the fire coming up the hallway and the bright, sad look in Frankie's eyes and something about his tears got to me even if they weren't tears at all but just watering eyes from the smoke and for a while I was hypnotized until Dad pushed Henry in the back and Henry fell forward into Frankie and Frankie's gun went off. Frankie was out of the way with Henry on top of him and Dad took the chance and beat it for the front door but as I stepped up closer and looked out the hallway into the front room I saw Johnny take one step across the room and stick what looked like a Boy Scout pocketknife in Dad's side.

I was about to let out a scream when Frankie pushed Henry up and on top of me and I was pretty sure he was going to kill me then but instead he joined Johnny at the window and I heard the gun go off a few times and I figured the cops were there. To be honest, I couldn't really tell what was happening on account of my chest feeling like it was about to explode and the smoke choking me out and the fact that bullets were hitting the walls all around me, too, and it felt like the walls that weren't burning were exploding. Someone was shooting from outside, too.

I pushed Henry off the top of me and yelled at him that we had to get going because of the fire that was spreading everywhere only when I looked down at him I saw he'd been shot right in the stomach and the blood was starting to come out of him pretty fast and was getting all over me. He just stared at me with eyes the size of golf balls like some kind of spook and his body didn't move and he didn't say a word – I couldn't even see him breathing, although to be honest I wasn't looking that hard on account of everything going on around me.

What I'm about to tell you is basically the first time I've been able to really say what happened that night in the farmhouse and is basically the whole reason I'm telling this story to begin with. I sized Henry up and tried to figure if I could get him up over my shoulder and to the front door and while I was thinking it I started to cry again because just thinking about it was stupid. I was too small and hadn't eaten or had a drink of water in days and could barely breathe with all that smoke in the house and even though all I wanted to do was stay with Henry I knew there wasn't anything I could do. His eyes were starting to go back to a normal size and I just sat there crying over him and when we finally made eye contact all I could think about was what the Deer Woman said to me when we were at the bottom of the Cimarron about how I was a sinner like everyone else and it occurred to me that Henry wasn't really much of a sinner and wasn't anything like any of us and all I'd ever done was make his life worse than it was before I met him.

I scrambled and left him right there, burning and bleeding. To tell the truth, I usually tell people that Henry died saving me on account of that sounding a whole heap of a lot better than I saved myself but that's basically what I did. I ran like the sinner I was. Well, I didn't technically run, I crawled on my belly past both Goodwin brothers who'd been shot dead and looked for Dad who was gone and I crawled on outside. I knew right then when I was crawling on my belly across that old farmhouse that I wasn't ever going to have the Spirit or at least I had it and couldn't feel it like Henry said. I wasn't ever going to be able to save anyone. In fact, like with Henry, the best I'd probably do was just make things worse. And like that I got out of the house and took off running.

Outside I could see lights from a fire truck and a cop car and I could hear a couple of people yelling at me to get down and what sounded like Mom's voice calling my name but I

don't quite remember running across PaPa's backyard except for when I tripped halfway and looked down and saw it was Dad's body I was tripping on, only I kept running and without even thinking I jumped into Mom's arms and started crying like the day I was born. Mom was there and PaPa was, too – every time the sheriff would come over to ask me questions he'd fight him off with his cane. I told them about Henry and where Dad was and the Goodwin brothers and after that they basically left me to myself. They eventually found Dad and drug him back to where we all were and I could hear him moaning and groaning while one of the firefighters tried to figure out what was wrong with him.

I'd tell you how I felt right then but to tell you the truth I'm not sure how I felt. I'm not sure I knew how to feel or at least what I was supposed to be feeling. I just stood there with everyone else and watched the whole house go up in flames while some firemen tried to get it to stop burning and I tried my hardest not to think about how everything was basically my fault, even Henry.

After a while a truck with its lights on pulled up all crazy like and a pretty beefy guy in a cop shirt and his underwear got out of it and I knew right away it was Henry's brother, Kirby. The sheriff walked over to him and started talking to him and without saying a word Kirby took off across the field and I heard the sheriff yell something at him about how he was drunk and he tried to chase him down and stop him but Kirby took a swing at him and ran right into the burning house. I remembered the time that he lit into Henry pretty bad with the belt and the thought occurred to me that even he'd go into the fire and just after he did, like the house had been holding on to that roof for just that moment, the whole thing came crashing down and just like that what was left of Henry's family went up in smoke.

Basically all I'd wanted was to get my family saved but I knew then that I wasn't the saving type and that maybe I needed saving just as much as they did. It was all my fault really, but as I stood there with them I couldn't help but think that it was sort of their fault, too. It was sort of everyone's fault if you think about it and even though I was starting to feel again and the only feeling I had was guilt, I also sort of felt free standing there with Mom and PaPa and with Dad there getting stitches and by that point half the town of Cimarron. It felt good to stand there with them, just like one of them, and I knew then that some people really want to be good – they just can't figure out how to do it.

They were all there with me and they were only alive on account of the fact that they were inside of me and I was only alive on account of the fact that I was inside them, which basically meant that I was one of them just as much as I was one of everybody. I couldn't be Jesus Christ or Luke Skywalker anymore than they could. Only those people were those people and who I am is Goose. I was just like them, like a thousand embers from a fire reaching up and mixing up with the stars before they turned to ash and blew away with the black smoke filling up that ocean of Cimarron sky. I tried to follow the ash and I thought about how Henry was a part of it, making his way up into the spirit world or whatever, but I couldn't see where any of it was going in the blackness.

And so I stepped back and stood with everyone else and watched that farmhouse burn to the ground and I realized that it wasn't really my story in the end, it was Henry's, and right there I said the first real prayer I ever said and I asked whoever or whatever would listen to save us. Save us all.

Chapter 25

I had to go back to Stillwater and tell the judge everything that had happened, just like it happened. They put Dad back in prison for cooking meth and helping escaped convicts and a whole slew of other crimes and the judge told me that he wasn't going to be out for a long time. Mom up and vanished again, only this time without me. They were going to put her away for being neglectful and all that but she disappeared just in time, which was fine by me. She's probably somewhere in Stillwater, doing whatever she has to do to stay in meth. Part of me hoped they'd put me back with PaPa. It wasn't that bad staying with him, after all, and he was one hell of a cook. But the county decided he wasn't fit to take care of me either – said he was partly responsible for the whole mess. I'm allowed to visit him, but I never do.

At first they stuck me in the Boys' Ranch, which is basically this prison for screwed up kids sponsored by the Lion's Club. It's this white building that looks like half a pipe sticking out of the ground. There were twelve of us and we all had to wear blue jeans and bright orange t-shirts and Mr. Wellington, the man who ran the place, gave us each chores to do. Mine were to collect the pillowcases twice a month and help with the dishes after lunch every day. Everyone wanted to know if I was the kid that helped kill those escaped convicts but I didn't say a word. Normally I would be proud of something like that, but inside I knew

the truth. It wasn't them I killed, after all. Thankfully after a month or so we got a new kid for everyone to pester: Otis.

He barely looked the same all cleaned up and in his blue jeans and orange but I recognized him right away. We didn't speak but at night I sat up burning thinking about how him and Anthony got away with all Henry's money. At least he ended up in a place like Lion's Boys' Ranch. Then again, that's where I ended up, too.

The day I got picked up by my foster care workers he came up to me while I was stuffing socks and underwear into a Wal-Mart sack they'd give men.

"Where are you going?"

"Wherever they send me. You not with Anthony anymore?"

"Nah, not anymore. They picked him up. Said he wasn't any good for me. You not with that big moron anymore?"

Now I live with Brett and Annie, this couple that lives off Mehan Road right between Stillwater and Cimarron. They took me off the state's hands for a government check, but the more I get to know them the more it gets to seem like they have other reasons, too. Brett owns a carpet-cleaning place in Stillwater and spends all his time in his garden when he isn't at work. Almost everything we eat comes out of that garden, including the eggs, which come from a couple of chickens that Annie says are a "damned mess." She teaches at the high school in Cimarron and says one day Ill have her for a teacher, which is assuming, of course, that I stick with school and keep straight and all that.

I figure it's better to be in school, though, than rotting at the Boys' Ranch.

School isn't as bad as I thought it would be. They put me right back where I left off, in Ms. Bumpass's class, and I sit up in the front row next to Benny Wellington, whose dad ran the Boys' Ranch and whose mom owned the Hair Cottage, where Mom used to work. Ms. Bumpass is nice enough and I like being in her class because she was the closest person to me that knew what I was really like, who I really was. It was like some kind of dark secret we shared and it made everything around us feel a little smaller.

Sometimes I have a hard time concentrating, though. None of the other students really talk to me and not everything Ms. Bumpass says makes sense, so I sort of zone out and pretend like maybe I'm somewhere else. I close my eyes and I can feel those roots again, tying me up and carrying me down and down but it doesn't bother me now. It almost feels comfortable and I try to focus on the roots and where they're taking me below. I never look up – can't bear to see what's up on that tree above me. I know what it is – or who it is – but I know if I look there I won't ever be able to look away.

Once Annie told me to sit down for supper and when I did the backdoor swung open like a flash of lightning and Brett came in laughing with mud on his boots, which I knew Annie wouldn't take kindly to. She threw a towel over her shoulder and put her foot out to the side like she meant business but Brett didn't stop laughing. He had his hands cupped together like maybe there was water in them but the mud on his knuckles was dry.

“Look what I found,” he said. He raised one hand up like he was stretching out rubber cement and I saw the flick of a tail and then the body of a garter snake the color of dried-up old pine nettles and about as long as a pencil twist up his wrist and look at me and Annie.

She screamed.

“Get that thing out of here!” She pulled the towel off of her shoulder and started swatting at Brett and the whole thing was sort of comical at first.

“It’s just a garter,” I said and I stepped between her and Brett. “Can I see?” Brett dipped his wrist down to eye level with me and I studied it real hard. His tongue flicked and he reached out at me and I looked right in his black eyes, and for a second I thought we were going to have a moment or something like that until Annie sent that towel down between us like a starting flag at a speedway. She hit that thing right on the head and it went dialing to the floor and landed right on its back and he struggled to get all those scales straight for a while.

Annie started screaming again and Brett started to swoop down to get it when Annie’s heel came down and smashed that little snake’s head into toothpaste. Its tail flickered twice more and it’s body wriggled to the side, trying to escape nothing. I wished I’d gotten to touch it but I tried my best to look like I didn’t care and that it was sort of funny because Brett was laughing again.

I guess PaPa was sort of right: some prophecies do come true.