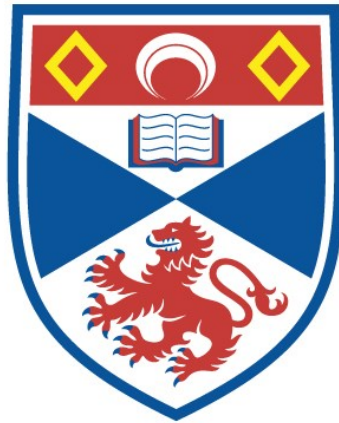


# The dagger

Armaan Miles Maharaj

A thesis submitted for the degree of MFA  
at the  
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## **Abstract**

This novel excerpt from *The Dagger* was started as an attempt to understand the rise of alt-right extremist groups in the United States, as well as the conditions that made their rise possible. It aims to accomplish this through the perspective of a fictional young man from a middle-class background, Tom, who reaches adulthood near the apex of the movement's overt social influence between 2014 and 2017. In the novel, Tom is drawn to a self-help and meditation retreat at a place called Sun Ranch, located in the Inland Empire of Southern California. The retreat, which targets disaffected young men of primarily white backgrounds, is led by a charismatic but reclusive yoga teacher named Curtis. In his lessons, he blends Californian interpretations of Hindu and Buddhist mysticism with fascist political precepts. As the retreat goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that Curtis has more than his students' wellness in mind, and that he has a plan for the rights-based society he sees as his enemy.

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## THE DAGGER

### CHAPTER 1

My life has been marked by my inability to understand other people. That is the one through line I was able to pick out in my life as I sped toward eighteen. The draft, cigarettes, sex, porn. The point when you can and must make real decisions. People say that it's okay not to have things figured out in your teen years, even when you're eighteen or when you're in college. You're still developing, they say, and everyone is awkward and anxious about the future at that age. But they also say, "the signs were there," or "I could tell he'd amount to nothing," or "with that upbringing? It was never going to turn out well."

I know it's impossible for anyone to completely understand anyone else. When someone says, "I feel bad," and you feel bad for them, the pain you feel is your own and not theirs. That's not what I'm talking about when I say I failed to understand other people. I am talking about the invisible forces that guide their lives and actions, which they seem to sense in each other, that they share winks over.

There are some things I know about this guiding power. I know that leads people to make decisions, to choose jobs, friends, fields of study, pets, cars, girlfriends, boyfriends, and enemies. It was sometimes so strong it made them cry, or feel joy, or drove them into a rage. It made their most important life decisions they made feel natural, even overwhelming, whether they were good or bad. This is something I have never experienced. Because of that, whenever I started to get close to someone, or someone started getting close to me, it would always end with us

realizing that we were on different pages of different books, and it would save us both a lot of trouble if we went our own ways.

This didn't always make me unhappy. When I was a kid, I had almost nothing to complain about, as far as making friends was concerned. I had plenty of friends, though none I could call best friends. I never got bullied. But I also never stayed friends with the kids I knew in elementary school and didn't care to.

I was born in rural Connecticut, but my parents and I moved to Southern California when I was seven, leaving behind two university positions for two slightly better ones. They taught biochemistry, and their home offices were full of books that had strange symbols and diagrams in them.

My dad kept all his books in locked glass cabinets. One day I snuck into his office when he left it unlocked and walked along the shelf-lined walls, trying to read the spines of the books behind the glass doors and guess at what they had inside them. There was one volume with a silver spine whose title I couldn't understand, but I always came back to it. Above the title there was a photo of a naked woman standing with her arms at a slight angle from her body and her palms facing outward. She looked out from the photo with her eyes wide open and attentive, but her expression seemed indifferent. She didn't have private parts like me, and the skin on the left side of her body had been peeled away to reveal a tangle of red and pink lines winding their way around strange objects that looked like multicolored stones.

I was trying to pry open the cabinet when I felt a pair of heavy hands pull me back and spin me around. It was the first time I'd seen him angry.

“Did I say you could come in here, Thomas?”

“No.”

“Do you know how much danger you were in?”

He rapped the glass with his knuckle, rattling it in its wooden frame.

“These are old cabinets, Thomas. If you’d pulled any more, they would have fallen on you and hurt you very badly. Is that what you want to happen?”

“No.”

“Then don’t come into this room unless I say you can.”

This moment stuck with me, probably more than my dad intended. I felt like I had burnt the house down and it was my fault. But if what my dad said was designed to deter me from his books, they had the opposite effect. Even through my guilt, I became more fascinated with books than ever. My passing interest in them became an obsession. These were no longer strange objects behind glass cases: they were now dangerous, powerful things, and I wanted to learn what was inside them.

At school I started to spend almost all my recess time in the library. The librarian, Mr. Romero, took notice and started saying hi to me every time I walked through the door, something that made me feel uncomfortable and proud, like I had some special adult privilege. Mr. Romero always wore a faded Hawaiian shirt and the kind of glasses you could hang around your neck. Even though there was a no-open-toed-shoe policy at the school, he often got away with wearing socks and sandals. He never got angry at kids for talking too loudly, and everyone respected Mr. Romero too much to dare to disturb the peace of the library. Even the kids who hated the library liked Mr. Romero. Many kids called him their favorite teacher, ignoring the fact that he was only a librarian.



When I was returning my library books one day Mr. Romero handed me a big, plastic-jacketed library book whose binding had all but come apart. “Here,” he said, “this is a little present for you.”

I held it in front of me, not sure how to deal with it.

“Is it for me to keep?”

“It was going to be thrown away, but I thought you might like it. I saw you've been reading a lot of fantasy lately.”

In scratched gold letters, the cover read “THE MEDIEVAL ATLAS” over a picture of a suit of armor.

“Can I take it home?”

“As long as you tell me what you thought about it when you’ve finished it.”

When I got home, I devoured the book. Opening to the table of contents I found a list of chapters with titles like *The Viking Age*, or *The Crusades*, or *The Black Death*. Each of these were discrete historical eras, each with a central issue. For the Viking Age, it was the Nordic migrations; for the Crusades, the control of the Holy Land; for the Black Death, the struggle for life itself. In each era the currents of history were so strong that you would be powerless to resist the path set out for you. You had no choice but to grapple with the ravages of disease, or war, or the displacements of cultures. In the plague chapter, Florence was largely spared the effects of the plague due to its strict quarantine laws. Lyon was spared because it had won the favor and protection of Mary. Other cities succumbed to the Black Death because of their ignorance or sin.

Death shadowed every major era in this book. The bigger the era, the greater the number of deaths. One of the last chapters, detailing the conquests of Timur the Lame, had an illustration that looked like an enormous pile of sugar someone had poured in a desert somewhere. Looking

closer, I could see that it was a pile of human skulls that meandered up toward the clouds in a jagged pyramid. The few trees among the sand dunes were swaying in the breeze, and in the distance a plume of black smoke spiraling into the sun.

Below was the caption:

*Ibn Arabshah claimed that after sacking Aleppo, Timur ordered his men to take twenty thousand heads from their victims' corpses and pile them outside the city. Historians believe that this number represents one tenth of a percent of the 17,000,000 people Timur killed to build his empire, The largest Islamic empire of its time. [...] The great wealth of Timur's conquests fueled a new golden age of literature, painting, architecture, mathematics, astronomy, theology, philosophy, and culture on a scale unprecedented even in Persia.*

The mention of all these great elements of civilization and culture in the context of systematic murder, as the direct consequence of that murder, disturbed me. I thought that my life was pretty good, but it made me wonder what horrible cruelties had been committed to make it possible.

Every week Mr. Romero gave me a new book, or even two, that the library had to throw away. He tried to diversify my interests: some days he would give me a guide to geology, other days anatomy, or astronomy. I did my best to look grateful and excited whenever he gave me one, but I think he could tell I was only interested in the history books. In the end he acquiesced and only gave me books on history and the humanities.

One day he gave me an illustrated history of the Punic Wars, complete with battle maps and painted sea battles and drawings of heated debates in the Roman and Carthaginian senates. Unlike the other books, it was in good condition and didn't even have any library stickers on it.

Whenever I picked up the book I would always skip back to the same section first, where Hamilcar makes Hannibal promise to destroy Rome. Hamilcar's command to his son was so forceful it was as if he might expect resistance, his eyes flashing with anger and his lips in a snarl as he dictates the words of the oath for his son to repeat. Yet in the book's illustration the young Hannibal looks into the ritual fire with cold resolution, his arms outstretched like he was embracing the fate that his father set out for him. There was something scary and at the same time alluring about the image that I could never work out, no matter how many times I flipped back to that page.

"Did dads really used to be like that?" I asked Mr. Romero one day, pointing to the illustration of Hamilcar and Hannibal. Mr. Romero peered down at the book, putting on the reading glasses that dangled around his neck.

"Oh yes," he said. "Many dads are still like that too, but maybe not as many as before. You're very lucky. Your dad doesn't seem anything like that man."

The only times that Mr. Romero didn't say hi to me was when there was an assembly for "flag salute". I hated being forced to sing boring patriotic songs for an hour, far more than any kid could be expected to take. After going a couple of them, I noticed that none of the teachers were paying attention to who was walking to the flagpole, and that it was trivial to slip away to the library until the flag salute was over. The first time I slipped into the library Mr. Romero was reading a novel at the front desk. He glanced up at me for a second, looked back down and turned the page without a single sign he had noticed me walk in. I walked to the back corner without saying anything, grabbed a book, and read until the bell rang to signal the end of flag salute.

This became our silent ritual for the next few months. Every Tuesday morning when I would slip into the library, Mr. Romero would make sure he was in the back room so he could have some plausible deniability if someone asked if he had seen me come in.

I was determined to get out of going to flag salute as long as I could, but I knew it couldn't last forever. So, when half a dozen teachers stormed into the library one Tuesday, I didn't feel afraid or guilty. I set my book on the shelf and went with them willingly, even as they accosted me for worrying everyone sick. Two of the teachers stayed behind to talk to Mr. Romero, who was doing his best to look surprised to see me there in the library.

The teachers said nothing to me as they marched me down the empty halls. I had expected to be taken to the principal's office, but instead they took me to the quad and made me finish the flag salute, which was still well underway. It had been so long since my last time at a flag salute that I couldn't remember what the procedure of events was, much less the lyrics to "My Country Tis of Thee".

Mrs. Kluge, my teacher, took me by the shoulder and steered me towards the other fourth graders. Most of them were rocking back and forth on their heels and casting uneasy glances at the cloudy sky.

She grabbed my other shoulder and spun me around to look me in the eyes.

"Look at me, Thomas. Look at me. When this is over you're going to have a talk with Mr. Phuong about your behavior today. Do you understand?"

Behind her, two of the kids I played cards with after school were pointing at me and whispering to each other. The girl who sat next to me in the computer lab craned her head over the crowd to see what was happening to me, ducking back down to report back to her giggling

friend.

“Thomas, do you understand me?”

“Yes, Mrs. Kluge.”

“Now go. Get in line over there, between Rice and Richards.”

I shouldered my way through the crowd and took my place between Nora Rice and Mason Richards, the feeling of my classmates’ eyes palpable on my back. My face was burning red. It didn’t matter what the reason was: if the other kids found out you were going to Mr. Phuong’s office, then you weren’t a good kid anymore. The idea of having a talk with Mr. Phuong was scary enough, but letting everyone see that I was being sent to his office was far worse.

Over the heads of the other students, I could see that some kind of skit was being put on by a group of first graders in tricorns and white paper wigs. Each of them had to share the same microphone, and even if I were paying attention, it was beyond impossible to understand a single word they were saying as they mumbled into their scripts. A few of the other fourth graders coughed: first softly every now and then, and then louder and louder, until the whole quad was reverberating with grotesque, phlegmy coughing that nearly drowned out the first graders. I looked back at the teachers to see if they would do anything, but their eyes were glued on the skit. I joined in with a few coughs of my own, calling on my deepest phlegm reserves to make the most disgusting, retching cough I could muster. The girl standing next to me was biting her lips to stop from laughing, squirming in place and nervously twisting the soles of her checkered sneakers into the ground.

At last a tentative round of applause rose from the crowd, signaling that the first graders had finished their performance. Two different first graders stepped forward with the microphone

and waited for the crowd to finish their applause.

“Please prepare for the pledge of allegiance,” they said in unison with a sing-song voice.

“Put your right hand over your heart.”

There was a rustling of fabric as the children held up their arms.

“Ready, begin.”

“NINE ELEVEN!”

I dug my nails into my hands, trying not to laugh. The shout had come from a few of the fifth graders just behind me. Again I glanced at the teachers, thinking that this was way too far over the line. But the fifth graders had timed their attack perfectly: once a patriot started reciting the pledge he or she entered a trance, in which the patriot was honor-bound to complete the recitation from start to finish without interruption. In any case the damage was already done: the first graders reciting the pledge had been thrown off by the outburst, and they mixed up the words of the pledge they were supposed to be guiding us through.

“...and to the God—the republic...for which it st-stands...understands—uh, under God...”

The drone of voices wavered, as the younger kids got confused by the first graders’ bungled recitation. The teachers were still completely clueless. For all I knew, they might have thought that shouting “nine eleven” was an act of patriotic solidarity.

Every flag salute from then on, I joined in with the other kids in shouting “nine eleven” before the pledge of allegiance. Even at nine years old, I knew that saying the name of a national tragedy wasn’t comedic genius, but it was about more than just being funny. It was a *fuck you* to our teachers, and to the jealous flag that needed so much praise and attention. We wanted to be more than defiant to the flag: we wanted to be callous, insensitive, almost stupidly indifferent to the flag and its rituals. It felt good to insult the flag *together*. It was like all of us, hundreds of us,

were best friends. Not because we got along, or because we liked to play together, but because all of us had a common enemy in school.

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## CHAPTER 2

That changed in high school. Before high school, friends were not particularly important. Being friends was a much simpler thing. But making long sustained friendships, ones where you met on the playground every day at the same time, always seemed like so much energy to maintain. Just having acquaintances, and not best friends, was enough for me. As I entered the ninth grade at a school where I now knew no one, the speed with which other students formed cliques filled me with panic. The speed with which people became best friends was mystifying to me. The closest thing to a best friend I'd ever had was Mr. Romero, and that friendship had taken weeks of trust and interaction to make each other close friends. And now I didn't even have that. A few weeks after I was caught in the library Mr. Romero was replaced, and I was too ashamed to ask the principal what school he was transferred to.

Whenever I tried to get close to someone in high school, to interact with them, talk about the kind of things we liked, a moment would always come where I saw that we had misunderstood each other at a fundamental level. Now that I wanted to make friends, my need for human contact was voracious. At some point in our conversation, the other person would let his guard down and act chummy with me, like he really did see me as a friend, while I felt like I still barely knew him. Inevitably I would screw up and creep him out. I would ask him where he'd be after school and how long he'd be there, or hover by his shoulder at lunch like he was—because he was—my only friend. The guard he had let down would come back up, and I would throw myself at him again and again until I was practically begging him to push me away.



My struggle to make friends in high school wouldn't have been so bad if it weren't for the fact that my old consolation, reading, no longer consoled me. Something about puberty and the development of the brain meant that it was now impossible for me to get lost in a book the way I could as a kid. Now reading exhausted me. Even after an hour with a book I found my eyes jumping over the bars of text, or re-reading the same line over and over again, unable to absorb its meaning. I didn't stop reading, but books were no longer something I could lose myself in.

In my junior year, I developed a technique to get the social contact I needed when I wanted to relieve this pain directly. Lingering near a group of friends, I would look at my phone and listen in on their conversation. Sometimes I would identify myself with one of the speakers, like I was rooting for him. When the others laughed at his jokes, or listened to what he said, I would take satisfaction in it as if he were me, and the more satisfaction I took, the easier it was to identify myself with him.

I was convinced that was enough. The loneliness I felt was really a form of envy, a desire for something I didn't have. Ignoring and appeasing that jealousy was usually enough. I was sure that I was right: that it was pointless to look for friends, that I had yet to find anyone who would be a good friend to me. Sometimes after sitting in on a friend group and identifying with one of them, I looked back on what they said with disgust, ashamed to have taken pleasure in identifying myself with someone so idiotic, sycophantic, attention-seeking. In fact, now that I think of it, I cannot remember a single instance where I found the person I identified with to be admirable in any way. I could not help seeing in all of them a barely restrained thirst for attention, underlying every word they said. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was finding fault where there was none out of paranoia and distrust, but I was too tired to keep trying.

When I was waiting for my bus home from school, I used to look at the office building across the street. It fascinated me for some reason. Its exterior was covered in big, reflective glass window panels set in steel frames, the way most city office buildings are, and these sleek, windowed sections were interrupted by stretches of stucco wall at hundred-foot intervals. It took up half the block, and the half it didn't take up was for its parking lot. There was no door facing the street, giving it the sense of being a background prop, the kind of anonymous buildings in video games that the player is never supposed to be able to access. The structure was on the one hand fake, and on the other hand crushingly real in its bland, simple functionality. The mere sight of it exhausted me, not just because in a vague way it represented my future. This building, like its thousands of copies across the world, was smooth, and clean, and certain. What architect, or cabal of architects, had decided that all the buildings in the world would essentially be variations on this same featureless block? Surely it wasn't deliberate; a collective lack of imagination had to be more likely. Then again, maybe it was deliberate. Maybe beating us down, cowing us with its hulking, placid mediocrity was part of the point, subconsciously grinding us into the meek, undifferentiated human paste such buildings preferred to consume.

\* \* \*

It was around this point that my parents impressed upon me the importance of my future. With ever-increasing frequency when I got home from school, I would find them in the kitchen waiting for me, ready to excoriate me for a failed exam or uncompleted assignment, which they somehow always found out about before me. The first time they did it I was speechless, standing

silent as they laid into me like I had just murdered their dog. I didn't know how to fight back against them directly. Instead, I retreated even more from my schoolwork, finding more and more excuses to get out of the house and away from their supervision. My grades plummeted, and when I got the results of my college applications, the only place that accepted me was the university twenty minutes away, Presidio College, where my parents were both professors in the mechanical engineering department.

When the letter came in the mail and I read out the result at the kitchen counter, my mom and dad cheered and lifted me into the air, as if they didn't know what the letter was going to say. I laughed and hugged each of them tight, an act that took all my emotional reserves and drained them in that one dizzying act of self-betrayal.

"Now to celebrate," Dad said, as he dashed to the master bedroom and reappeared with the car keys in hand, jingling them back and forth.

"Anywhere you want, it's our treat."

The thought of spending lunch with them, of talking about my bright, promising future, made my mouth water with nausea.

"I'm already supposed to be downtown right now," I said, doing my best to sound regretful.

"A couple guys I know from class are already celebrating their college acceptances and I said I'd join them."

"Oh," Mom said. "Well that's good, you can celebrate your acceptance letters together then!"

"That's even better," Dad said, handing me the keys with a tight-lipped smile on his face.

“You probably need a break from old Scylla and Charybdis here,” he said with a chuckle as he hung his arm over Mom’s shoulder.

“I would’ve said yes if I could,” I said, worrying the keys between my fingertips.

“There’s still dinner, I’ll be back in time for that.”

Mom shook her head. “Don’t worry about us, Son. Take the day for yourself. Whatever you’d like to do.”

I managed a smile. “Thanks, Mom. I’ll text you when I’m heading home.”

I made for the door before they could draw me into any more hugs or say anything about the future.

“We love you, Thomas,” Dad said as I opened the door.

“Love you too.”

“You earned this, Son.”

“You know it,” I said, and closed the door behind me.

At the first intersection the red traffic light blurred into an indistinct pink smudge in the bright, cloudless sky. When I felt the trickles going down my face I realized I was crying. Now that my body knew I was crying the sobs came next, so that I was a sniveling mess when the light turned green and I had to wipe the tears away as I made my left turn. I hadn’t cried since I fractured my shin as a kid. Here in the car, the feeling of tears and snot running down my face felt dirty and wrong, like having a nocturnal emission. When I found a parking spot downtown by the traffic circle I took a moment to dry my face with some fast food napkins in the glove compartment and composed myself. In the rear view mirror my eyes looked red and puffy, and the circles underneath looked even deeper than they usually were. There were the scruffy beginnings of a beard on my face, the result of a lapse in shaving that I justified by committing to

growing it out. The beard hairs were faint and thin, lighter than my dirty blond hair, and against my already pale face my beard was barely visible. I tilted the mirror back into place and got out of the car.

On the curb, I looked around the square at the cafes and umbrella-shaded tables that ringed the traffic circle. It looked like the kind of place that could be called a “town square”, but no one used the term. It would imply that this was the center of the municipality, which it was not, literally or symbolically. Instead, people called it the circle, or the traffic circle, or the roundabout. Presidio College was only a few blocks away, and normally the streets would be thronging with students at this time of day. Today there were only a few, recognizable as students because of their age and their loud, haranguing speech, as if they were the only people in the world. There were a few of them in the middle of the traffic circle, throwing something in the fountain and screaming or cheering each time they threw the substance in. These people would be in my classes. I would have to interact with them, laugh at their jokes, and go along with their bits. I locked the car and walked down Pike Street towards the antique store, the sound of the students’ screaming still audible over the roar of cars and motorcycles until I reached the storefront at the end of the block. Besides the army surplus store on the other side of the street—which also sold guns and ammunition—it was the only store in this part of town with barred doors and windows, which was part of what drew me to it when I first saw it as a kid. I felt like there was something important or dangerous in the store, something that had to be guarded like gold or weapons. In truth it was more a glorified thrift store than an antiques store, even though that’s what it read on the sign: PRESIDIO ANTIQUES. But for Americans it doesn’t take much time for something to get old, and if your store sells slinkies from thirty years ago, that might as well be an antique.

As soon I walked inside I was met with a booming “Woah, it’s you!”

A man I’d never seen before was behind the register, raising his hands as if recognizing a long-lost friend. White, early forties, wearing jeans and a Tommy Bahama shirt that was a size too big. “You’re back!” he said with a grin. “You thinkin’ of buying something this time around?”

His face was inscrutable, a mask of pure earnestness. Was this man working there now, or was he the new owner? I had no memory of seeing him the last time I was at the store. Ever since I first came here, the store had been run by an older Japanese man with the kind of 70s glasses Jeffrey Dahmer used to wear. I glanced around the rest of the store, but I didn’t see him anywhere.

“Sure, I can,” I managed, and made for the stairs. I wanted to disappear into the basement level as soon as I could.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” the man called after me like a kids’ soccer coach. “Let me know if you need any help, I’m right here.”

I went to the back of the basement and started flipping through clothing racks. Tommy Bahama guy was right, I didn’t buy anything the last time I was here, and I almost never did. I went through the store like it was a museum of cultural detritus. Most of it was useless junk, but it told a kind of emergent story as I looked through it all.

Between two Winnie the Pooh shirts on one of the T-shirt racks I pulled out a black, custom-printed shirt that caught my eye. On it was a cartoon depiction of Saddam Hussein’s face, bloated and scowling, as a boot stomped on his head and sprayed gobs of brain and blood in all directions. “Bikers Against Saddam Hussein” the Word Art text read out, spelling “BASH” with each capital letter. I picked up the dangling price tag: \$120. Clicking my tongue, I flipped

over the price tag as if there might magically be a different figure on the back. With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I remembered that I told Tommy Bahama that I'd buy something, and I really, really did not want to give in to him by plopping down some useless trinket at the front register with a big, I'm-not-a-shoplifter smile on my face, like I knew he wanted me to.

I heard footsteps and looked up to see a guy around my age coming down the aisle, an army ruck slung over one shoulder. He had a shock of messy, bleached hair, and around his neck was a pair of massive studio-type headphones whose cable led into the pocket of his jacket. "Bullshit, right?" he said, shaking his head. "I was looking at that a second ago."

"Yeah, all the other shirts here are like ten bucks."

"Oh, they know what they're doing. The new owner's wised up to the kind of things rich kids will break daddy's bank account for. They should really be checking bags at the door with all these relics lying around, especially since their security cameras clearly don't work."

I glanced at the camera in the corner of the room. I couldn't tell if it was on or not, but it was covered in a thick layer of dust.

"Maybe they should," I said. "If you're too lazy to protect your own shit, you deserve what you get, I suppose."

Bleached guy's eyes lit up. "Speaking of good shit," he said in a hushed tone, "Did you see the new stuff they have upstairs?"

"How new?"

"Oh you'd remember. This shit might not even be legal. C'mere."

I followed him up the stairs to the glass cases on the right side of the ground floor, where older curios were usually displayed. In the reflection of one of the cases I caught a glimpse of my face, but not for long enough to see any details. Had it been long enough for my eyes to stop

looking red and puffy? There's no way. I definitely looked like I'd just been crying. Maybe this guy was taking pity on me, cheering me up in case I'd been planning on throwing myself in front of a truck outside.

"Feast your fucking eyes," he said, squatting down and extending his arms towards the bottom case with a flourish of wriggling fingers.

"What the fuck."

I squatted down next to him to get a closer look at the top shelf of that case.

"What skinhead cunt is this guy buying from?"

Bleach laughed. "It's Presidio, man. We really shouldn't be surprised."

The case was brimming with the most racist and far-right memorabilia items I'd ever seen in one place. I'd seen the odd mammy doll at stores like this before, but this had Nazi artifacts too, things so rare I'd never seen them in person before.

I recognized a lot of the memorabilia directly from the history books I pored over as a kid. There was a Stahlhelm emblazoned with the old Reichsadler; a Volkssturm armband; a ribbon from a 1940s Fallschirmjäger uniform; some Iron Crosses with the ribbons still attached. A metal death's head pin bared its teeth at me, its empty sockets blind to the world of the living.

There were a few Nazi things that looked fake, or at least looked like they didn't come from Nazi Germany. A few rather plain-looking ceramic plates had SS runes in the middle, and there was even what looked like an SS gravy pitcher. Some of the items had nothing to do with the Third Reich at all and definitely came from America, like a wood-handled pocket knife with a crude carving of a Klansman on it.

When I craned my head down to the bottom shelf, I saw the dagger. As soon as I saw it I couldn't look away from it. It felt like it was being pointed at me: not as a threat, but as an



indication, like the needle of a compass pointing to true north. The grip was jet black, maybe ebony. Near the bottom of the grip there was a small circle of brass enclosing the SS runes, and on the bottom I could barely see the shape of something that looked familiar: an Othala rune, I realized, from the Elder Futhark.

The double-edged blade looked stout and heavy. Down the length of it in Fraktur lettering was the motto of the SS: *Meine Ehre heißt Treue*. Though the blade was gleaming and untarnished, a lattice of scratch marks attested its use. Together they formed a chicken-scratch sentence: *I was made for a purpose, and that purpose was fulfilled.*

“It’s cool, right?”

Tommy Bahama was standing behind me, his hands on his hips. Bleached hair guy was nowhere to be seen. How long had I been staring at this case?

“You’d never see something like this in another store. It’s really historical. That’s the kind of thing you’d put on your shelf and show off to your friends. So cool, right?”

Bahama’s cheeks were slightly puffy and pink, with little, dark blood vessels visible underneath. His neck was starting to wrinkle but it was still soft, and when I looked carefully I felt like I could see the faint palpitation of skin over the carotid artery pumping blood to his brain.

I stood up and looked him in the eyes. “It’s *really* cool,” I said, lowering my voice. “I’ve been waiting to see something like this show up in this store for a long time now.”

“I bet you have. I can tell you’re the kind of guy that likes history, right?”

“Sir, I *live* for history. And they’re trying to make that a crime now, as you probably know. You probably run up against that problem with suppliers all the time.”

“Oh, you know it,” Bahama said, furrowing his brow.

“In America of all places, In *our country* they go and make it illegal to sell historical objects just because it triggers people.”

“Yeah.” For a moment, I saw Bahama’s eyes go out of focus. The first fissure. I had no idea if it was actually illegal to sell Nazi memorabilia in the US. But that moment, with Tommy Bahama’s greasy, shit-eating mug in front of me, I’d say anything to make him squirm.

“Well what I say is let ‘em be triggered. Whenever a ‘special’ college kid walks in here—the kind that wouldn’t be in college without affirmative action—and sees the victory runes on a knife like that, they’re gonna remember what that knife was used for. I don’t think that’s a bad thing to remember.”

Bahama nodded, fidgeting with the button on the bottom of his shirt. My face felt hot, and I could feel my skin tingling as my hairs stood on end. I was tensing every muscle in my chest and stomach, because I felt that if I didn’t my voice would start to shake.

“Well she’s all yours now if that’s the one you want,” he said, backing towards the doorway to the front room. “Let me go get the key and I’ll open it up for you.”

“No, that’s alright.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m in college. I can’t afford a thing like that.”

“Oh, no problem, there are some other interesting things there of historical value that might be more—”

“I’m really sorry, Sir, but I really have to pinch every penny I’ve got right now. But I have some friends that might be interested in this. A lot, actually. I can let them know if you like.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I did see a birthday card I really liked, though. Could you help me check out with that?”

“Sure, of course. See you up front when you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Outside, I threw the 50’s birthday card—which featured a woman in a cowboy hat spanking a scantily-clad woman in a feathered headdress—in the garbage can by the side of the road. The adrenaline rush of my confrontation with Tommy Bahama was starting to wear off, and I put my hands in my pockets to stop them from shaking.

As I was starting my car, I saw Bleach running towards me from halfway down the block. As he got closer, I could see he had a bankers box in his arms. I got out and leaned against the door, the engine idling.

“Hey, hold on,” he said out of breath. “That entire case...he sold me that entire case.”

“You bought all *that*?”

“Yeah! I didn’t catch exactly what you said, but you scared the shit out of that guy. As soon as you left he started clearing out that whole case. I got him to give me all of it for forty bucks.”

He put the box down on the sidewalk so he could open it and run his hand through the contents.

“I saw how you were looking at this thing. Take it. It’s yours.”

He held out the dagger with his other hand hilt-first, his fingers gingerly gripping the handle. The blade was in excellent condition, without any hint of a scratch, and the sunlight reflected off the blade made it almost impossible to look at directly. I shaded my eyes with one

hand. Looking more clearly at the handle, I could make out an Othala rune inlaid with what must be silver. “Sorry,” said Bleach, lowering the dagger a little. “Shiny little fucker.”

“Why don’t you keep it?” I said. Bleach scoffed.

“Believe me, I have enough knives already. Now can you take the knife before someone sees me waving Nazi shit around?”

He wagged the dagger back and forth and I grasped the hilt with both hands, if only to stop it from falling to the ground and stabbing one of us in the foot. It was heavy, like a dagger should be. Heavy enough you could really hurt someone just by bashing someone with the hilt. The pommel, that’s what it was called. Did daggers have pommels?

I realized I had been holding it in front of me with two hands like a dowsing rod, and Bleach was side-eyeing me. “Uh, Thanks. Thanks, I’ll keep it.” I put the dagger in the glove compartment of my car. “It didn’t come with a sheath?”

“Nope. You saw in the case. This one comes circumcised.”

“Very Jewish for a Nazi dagger.”

Bleach laughed, and as he laughed, I did too. I knew that the joke wasn’t really that funny. In any other circumstance I wouldn’t react at all. But something about the dagger, about the fact that I now own a fucking Nazi dagger, broke through the doom and gloom and made everything seem ridiculous.

“Dude, can you imagine,” Bleach said, catching his breath, “can you imagine the owner down in hell looking up and being like, ‘Mein Gott! Vat have zey done vith my penis?’”

“‘Uncircumcise me zis *instant!*’”

“‘Curse you, globalists!’”

Now I really started laughing. Tears were rolling down my cheeks, and when I wiped them away I saw Bleach was crying too, practically lying on the ground at this point.

“Globalists? Does he watch InfoWars or something?”

“Yeah, you haven’t seen him? He goes on there all the time.”

“How could I forget? He’s the guy who sells supplements. ‘You too can destroy the Judeo-Bolsheviks! As long as you buy my pure, Aryan cod oil supplement!’”

“Cod mit uns!”

I was wheezing. “*Cod mit uns!* God, that’s fucking stupid.”

“It is,” said Bleach. People on the sidewalk cast bemused glances and avoided us as they passed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d laughed so much. Not with someone else. When had I ever joked around like this with my old friends? It wasn’t like I was afraid of being unfunny, or that I couldn’t go along with a bit. That way of acting and thinking—something that I had no trouble accessing when I was alone—just shut off whenever I was around them. No matter how much I wanted to not care, some part of me was always on alert, unwilling to let go. Now, looking at Bleach laugh, I finally saw someone experiencing the same kind of happiness that I was feeling. The realization was so natural, so light and small, it didn’t pull me out of the moment like those kinds of thoughts usually did. I felt good.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Cal,” he said, as he sniffed and wiped his nose with his wrist. “It’s Collin, but you can call me Cal. What’s yours?”

“Tom.”

“Awn-shaun-tay, Tom.”

He got up off the ground, dusted his hand off on his jeans and extended it toward me. I shook it. “Awn-shawn-tay,” I replied. “I’m dizzy,” Cal said, rubbing his eyes. “I need to clear my head. Wanna walk with me to the record store?”

“Which one?”

“The good one. Undermine.”

I shook my head. “Never heard of it.” For a second Cal almost looked embarrassed.

“I thought I’d seen you there or something. I don’t know. I have a feeling you’d really like it, though. It’s not far, right around the corner there.”

He pointed down a narrow brick alleyway between the storefronts.

“That explains why I don’t know it. Lead the way.”

I locked the car and followed him down the cool, shaded alley. This area of town was where I’d always come to kill time walking around, and I thought I’d explored every inch of it until now. It wasn’t big enough to have a lot of alleyways to begin with, but I couldn’t remember ever walking down this one.

“Here it is,” he said, pointing to a brick storefront with frosted windows and a rusty steel door. “Are you sure this isn’t a two-dollar strip club?”

“Only spiritually.” He pulled open the squealing metal door and I followed him into a long, thin room that receded into the distance like a palatial corridor. The walls were flanked with record stands, and in the center of the floor down to the back were dusty piles of vinyls, CDs, and cassette tapes. In the corner was a battered oak desk with a cash register; the cashier, clad in a battle jacket, was nodding along to death metal leaking out of his headphones.

“WHAT’S UP!?” He shouted without looking up. I couldn’t see if he was looking at us behind his long hair.

“Hey man,” Cal mouthed.

“IS THAT A FRIEND YOU HAVE?”

“Old enemy.”

“BRUTAL. ENEMIES ARE BASED. FRIENDS ARE FUCKING GAY.”

“Tell ‘em, Parker.”

He turned back to me. “You’ve really never been here? It’s the only interesting place in this shithole.”

“I guess not? I mean, it doesn’t exactly announce itself to the public.”

“*Announce itself to the public?*” Cal drew out the words, narrowing his eyes. “You’re not a member of ‘the public’ are you?”

It was clearly a joke, but the words brought with them a twinge of dread that made my mind go blank. He had seen through me. The façade had fallen away.

He must have read my real, deer-in-the-headlights fear as fake, because he laughed, and I managed to laugh back. I shoved down the fear.

“I didn’t think so,” I said, “but you’re making me second guess myself.”

“I’ll try not to hold it against you, but watch yourself.” He made a sweeping gesture with his arm toward the vinyl stands. “Where do you want to jump in?”

“I don’t have a record player to play any of this on.”

“You’ll want to buy one once you see what they have. Let me show you.”

I followed him down to the back of the room. In the corner were a few old steamer trunks filled with vinyls, marked “MISC” on a paper stuck to the wall above them. “This is where all the weird stuff ends up,” Cal said. He squatted down and started rifling through the pile, which also seemed to contain tapes and CDs.

“Like this,” he said, handing me a narrow, worn box of slipcases that was taped closed with old, yellowed masking tape. *RAZING HEAVEN: VOICES FROM WACO* was the title in bold orange font across a blue background. Below the words was a silver symbol, what seemed to be a snake wriggling through the center of a star of David. I flipped it over and saw a picture of the Mount Carmel compound in flames, flanked by italic text.

*Disc 1 / Side A: Songs of Praise by David Koresh / Side B: Songs of Praise by David Koresh contd. / Disc 2 / Side A: The Lamb of God / Side B: Antichrists / Disc 3 / Side A: The Media / Side B: Hammer in Search of a Nail / Disc 4 / Side A: A Crown Was Given Unto Him / Side B: And He Went Forth Conquering, and to Conquer / Disc 5 / Side A: Silence in Heaven / Side B: Mercy*

“The Waco one’s been here a while,” Cal said. “I would buy it, but I already have the CD version. It’s one of the only places you can actually find David Koresh’s original music anymore, even now. There’s recordings of sermons, tv and radio coverage, tapes of the negotiations. Some actor reenactments. The sounds of the siege, too. The slaughtered rabbit sounds they blasted at them, the tanks and APCs, gunfire. Brutal shit.”

“Why are you handing me this?”

I wasn’t sure why I asked. It was exactly the kind of strange, enigmatic recording I would be interested in. But for some reason I wanted to see Cal thrown off guard by the bluntness of the question, and it worked.

“I mean, it’s interesting,” he said, his voice almost polite, restrained. “Isn’t it interesting? Who makes records of things like this?”



“Yeah, it’s bizarre. I haven’t seen anything like it.” I smiled, and he did too, his shoulders relaxing. “Good. I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s really cool. Finding stuff like this...it feels like it shouldn’t be possible. You shouldn’t be able to hear the voices of people who died like that. It’s like we’re digging up their graves or something.”

“I never thought of it like that. To me it’s more like seeing a ghost. Or time travel.”

Cal parsed through the mess of slipcases in the steamer and handed me a record with a blurry photo of a man behind a gate or a fence, flanked by two prison guards. *Charles Manson: Live from San Quentin*. “This one is insane. It’s mostly incoherent screaming, but you can make out a few words sometimes. You know, he wanted to be a pop star for a while before he got into the whole cult thing. He never stopped making music, though. All this was recorded in prison.”

“They let him perform in there?”

“No. All this was taped on shitty microphones they smuggled into his cell. The dude was determined, I’ll give him that. He really thought he could make it big.”

Cal handed me the record and bent down to dig for more. “So this is the kind of music you listen to?” I asked. “I’m not sure what I expected, but this was not it.”

“Talking about music is always kind of pointless. This isn’t music, and it happens to be interesting to talk about. So I picked it.”

He paused for a second, then kneeled down, drumming his fingers on the edge of the trunk. He was facing away from me, but some of the enthusiasm had gone out of his voice. “Honestly, I fucking hate music,” he said, and from the tone of his voice it was as if he were just realizing this. I laughed a little, thinking it was a joke, but his expression didn’t change. “I love sound, but I hate music,” he said. Resting his weight on the trunk,

he looked like a tired mourner bending over a casket. “There’s something really depressing about it. There is so much sound in the world, such an overwhelming, bone-shattering amount of sound, sound that can move in such complex, fluid ways, and we have this stunted, pattern-obsessed part of our brains that wants to shove it into notes and scales and...and shit like that.”

His fingers gripped the trunk harder, but his voice stayed flat.

“It’s like...it’s like we were given this beautiful thing, sound, and because we couldn’t understand how something like sound could be so beautiful, we had to drag it down into a form that we could understand. That didn’t have to happen. It was a mistake. And now we’re trapped inside that mistake. And now we have this wall between us and what sound could be. And sound is such a pure thing.”

I put down the records and knelt down next to him, but he kept his face turned away.

“It’s not like other things.” He said. “It’s pure. It’s like...”

“You don’t get to choose how it makes you feel.”

“No. You don’t get to choose. Sometimes you get those instants. You hear something. It’s something so good you don’t want to try putting it into words. That used to be what I tried to do. I used to think that if you could explain how you felt, if you could put it into something, some form, then that could improve your life. But explaining isn’t the point of anything. It’s not the point. If you can feel something that takes you out of yourself, nothing else matters. That’s the only sense you can make out of anything. That’s it. That’s the only sense.”

He stayed quiet, his hands still grasping the edge of the trunk. I didn’t know what to do with my arms while he was talking, so I’d folded them over my chest. Without thinking I pressed my thumb into the soft flesh under the middle of my ribcage, as if that might distract me from

whatever was twisting underneath. I could feel my defaults kicking in: don't move, don't say anything. So I sat still.

"That was stupid," he said, wiping his eyes. "I just did something really stupid, didn't I. I'm sorry."

"It wasn't stupid."

"It was. I shouldn't have started talking about that. I wasn't thinking about what I said. It barely makes sense now."

"It made sense to me."

Cal turned around and leaned back against the trunk. His hands were tired and slow as they wiped away more tears. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe you did. But it's not good to be this way. Not so easily. It's not healthy."

"*Healthy?*" I hissed. I grabbed his right forearm and pulled it toward me, forcing him to look at me. The violence of the act startled him, and it startled me too. For a moment I forgot what I was going to say, and I fought the urge to look away from his eyes. He could see me, but I could tell that he was looking at me from somewhere else.

"Cal, that is poison," I said. "Healthy? I don't know what 'empath' astrology girls you've dated, or what chick dragged you to therapy and tried to make you think you're broken. But 'mental health' has nothing to do with what you just talked about. You aren't sick."

I held my grip on his arm, as if holding it would force him to absorb the meaning of my words, to stop him from drifting off to whatever place he was lost in. Cal's eyes flitted back and forth, thinking.

"I feel like I am," he said. "I can't control myself."

“Why does control matter to you? Have you ever considered that when you experience something so strongly, that might be because what you feel is right?”

“HEY, FAGS!”

Parker was standing over us. I’d failed to notice the sound of death metal bleeding out of his headphones as he approached. “THIS AIN’T A WHOREHOUSE! GET A ROOM!”

It was hard to tell if he was being ironic or serious from his body language, or if he was even talking to us in any concrete way. I thought I could make out a grin behind the long hair that obscured his face, but at second glance it seemed just as likely that he was one of those people whose mouth was always open. He was holding the phone that his headphones were plugged into, and for a second I thought he might be on a voice call with friends.

I let go of Cal’s arm. “Is this guy autistic or something?” I said through gritted teeth so he couldn’t read my lips.

Cal mouthed something to Parker, but I couldn’t catch what.

“GOTTA KEEP THE SHOP CLEAN. NOTHING PERSONAL, FAGS!”

“Your shop is a fucking mess,” I said, standing. Parker was at least a foot taller than me. “Maybe you can’t see that through your tranny hair.”

“Ignore him. He’s joking with you.”

“I’m joking with him too,” I said, stepping closer to Parker. “Why aren’t you laughing, tranny? How about you laugh for us, nice and loud?”

“Tom, stop.”

I felt Cal’s hand on my shoulder. “I’ll talk about it outside.”

Parker turned his head away and hunched his shoulders, like he was trying to recede into his oversized battle jacket. He took a few steps back, bumping into a table precariously stacked

with open shipping boxes of records. Seeing him like this should have satisfied me. But something about this man's pitifulness, the way he crumpled into a shameless, mewling mess the instant I challenged him, took whatever pity I might have felt and turned it into anger. This was what poison looked like.

"Tom. Let's go. Now."

I let him walk me to the front door, his arm around my shoulder. Crossing the long, narrow room felt like it took even longer than when I walked in, the door approaching slowly like a ship on the horizon. When we got to the door, I heard a hissing sound from the back of the room. I turned back and saw it was Parker, He was facing me, his shoulders still slumped, face obscured by hair. Barely audible over the sound of his music, I could hear him making an "S" sound over and over, his head nodding slightly as he made each sound. "Ss, ss, ss, ss, ss—"

Cal opened the door. I turned back around and walked out. He started walking further down the alley, where it turned a corner and opened into a small private parking lot behind some restaurants. He was walking fast headed for the main road, staying just ahead of me as I tried to keep up. "I'm not going to blame you for anything you did," Cal said. "I didn't explain what Parker was like before I took you in."

"Is he your friend or something?"

"No. I just know him."

"Then why do you—" I could feel myself starting to get angry again, and stopped myself before I raised my voice. "You don't even know this guy that well, and you let him talk to you and your friends that way?"

"I'm saying this with respect, Tom, but I get the sense that there are certain things about people that you don't always pick up."

I scoffed and tried to think of something to say back, but nothing came. I knew he was right, but the way it was right derailed my train of thought. It didn't take much reflection to see that he was correct. I'd never been good at reading other people. It seemed like on almost a daily basis I had interactions with people where I misunderstood what the other person felt or wanted, or only realized later in the day that something was off about how the other person was reacting to what I was saying. But thinking that, knowing that fact, didn't give it any weight. It was evident, but the more I thought about it the more ridiculous it seemed. "Maybe," I said. "Maybe I do. But...but what do you expect me to do? When someone's screaming at you and you're clearly not okay? Do I need an excuse to push back, then?"

"I said I'm not blaming you. We don't need to talk about excuses."

"Well if you can't blame me, what are we talking about?"

I could hear a pleading tone creep into my voice and clenched my teeth, too late to take it back. I ran after him as he darted across the road, then turned down a street that led into the residential area. Sycamore trees and Sears catalog bungalows, ancient buildings by this town's standards. Cal finally slowed down a little and let me walk alongside him. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his army jacket, and I couldn't help feeling disappointed as he offered me the carton. "No thanks," I said. He shrugged and lit his own, shielding the flame from the breeze with his other hand. With his faded army jacket and the sycamore leaves falling around him, he reminded me of a picture of Ian Curtis I'd seen somewhere. Minus the bleached hair. The thought bothered me, and I tried to push it out of my head as I waited for Cal to figure out what he wanted to say.

"It's crazy, what we have in common," he said. "The things we have in common." Saying it made him smile a little. "I don't want to talk about it too much because it's like what I said

earlier. Some things are always sort of pointless to talk about. Even if it's tempting." He took another drag on his cigarette and let the wind snatch away the smoke as it escaped from his lips. "Point is, there are aspects of the way you act that look a lot like me about...about a year ago." He paused. "Fuck, it's only been one year. Anyway, I know the kind of headspace you're in right now. I'm barely out of it, personally, if I'm out of it at all. And I want to help you with that. But first we can talk about Parker, since I think you want to resolve that."

"I think I know what you're gonna say."

He glanced at me, waiting. I let my eyes wander away from him, over the Army and Marine Corps flags fluttering over the porches to our right. "You're gonna say he was retarded. Or handicapped. Mentally handicapped, something like that."

"Something like it," he said. "Why does that bother you so much?"

"Why does that bother me? I didn't realize he was...I didn't realize he was like that until after."

"You called him retarded. That was the first thing that came to your head. Why do you need to call him that?"

"I don't. It was dumb, I'm sorry."

"That's not what I'm asking for, but let me back up. I'm not an expert in mental illnesses or anything like that, but I have some experience dealing with it. In my family. Some friends of mine, too. I don't know exactly what Parker has, but he has something. You mentioned autism in the store. I know you meant it as an insult, but it might be that. Maybe something like autism, maybe autism with something else thrown in. The loud music is part of it. He doesn't have it so loud just because he's a metalhead. If he likes the sound of something, he cranks the volume as high as it can go. Doesn't notice how loud it really is unless you explain it to him. And how loud

he talks, even when I've seen him take off his headphones. His hearing isn't that bad, even with how much he fucks up his ears. He just can't control how loud his voice is unless you point it out. And the no direct eye contact. My brother was like that. Even if he knew you well, even if he really liked you, he couldn't look you in the eyes for more than a second."

He took another drag from his cigarette. A cop car cruised past us, and as Cal exhaled, I thought I saw it slow a little before it went on down the road. How old was this guy, anyway? I was barely eighteen, but I felt so much younger, especially right now. "Okay," I said. "I'm starting to see."

"So I won't surprise you when I tell you he has issues gaging his tone in social situations."

"But how do you fuck up that much? He was calling us fags and kicking us out of the store, that's a pretty big tonal fuck-up."

"He wasn't actually kicking us out. He's been experimenting with irony lately, trying out joking insults and stuff like that. He doesn't know how to make it sound natural yet. I think in his mind guys can cheer each other up by pretending to insult each other, and he doesn't really know yet when that's appropriate and when it isn't."

"He could tell you were upset, but he couldn't see how insulting you was a little tone-deaf?"

"Those are two different skills, but yes."

We came across a little empty park at a street corner, one that had the original 'street signs' that look like cobblestone obelisks. It was tiny, no bigger than the space one house would take up, with a few benches and tables with checkerboard patterns in them so you could play chess. Except for some rose bushes, there was no greenery. Cal sat down on one of the old stone



benches, and I sat on the other end. There was a conspicuously modern anti-homeless bar drilled into the middle.

Cal sat back with his legs crossed, one arm hung over the back of the bench. “The smoking doesn’t bother you, does it?” he asked. I said no, but he caught me looking at the conspicuous *NO SMOKING* sign on the wall across from us. He put out the cigarette on the sole of his boot and flicked it away. “I was done with it anyway. It’s a stupid ritual, helps me think. I should know better.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, watching the last gasp of smoke escape from the half-spent cigarette.

“Parker hasn’t figured out how to comfort people in delicate social situations yet. That way of talking was something he had to learn, and he doesn’t really get how it affects people.”

“Fine, I get that by now.”

He was quiet for a moment. I caught him clenching his jaw, but it passed.

“What I think you should consider,” he said more slowly, “is maybe you are also learning something. Not with communicating, but with how you deal with people. Or how you think other people deal with you.”

He said it calm and removed, the way a friend should probably say something like that. But in his words, I could hear another voice behind them: the voice of eternal, immutable truth, echoing down the ages. *You cannot see what is wrong with you. Why should anyone hope you can change?*

Cal waited for me to say something. I couldn’t.

“I feel bad about what I said, that you don’t pick up on some things. The way I said it was bad, and I don’t think it’s true the way I implied it was. I don’t think you’re unable to pick up

queues. I think you have a script in your head of how an interaction will go. It's a script that always ends badly. And it's like..."

He clicked his tongue, thinking. "This is gonna have to sound judge-y, but it's like you're *waiting* for someone to say something that fits your script, so you can fire back. Anything that doesn't fit that script goes out the window."

"You can't know that," I said. My words sounded strange, not my own. "Not every day is like today."

"Days like this speak for the other ones."

I stayed quiet. Speaking was hard now. Tiring. It was strange, the way sadness can put "I hope you can see I'm talking about myself here." I nodded. "Good," he said, leaning back again. "I'm not your psych. It's not my business what goes on in your head. I felt like I had to say something."

His phone started vibrating and he pulled it out to see who was calling. He declined it and put the phone away before I could see the name on the screen. I tried to remember the last time someone had called me other than my parents. It would have been months ago. Right now, somewhere close by, someone was waiting for Cal. A roommate? A girlfriend?

"I have to go soon," he said. "I'm sorry about how this all went. I should have known better, what I said at the record store. I shouldn't have put that all on you."

"It's okay," I said. "I should apologize, shouldn't I?"

"To who? Oh, to Parker. That's okay, I can talk to him. It would be better coming from me, trust me."

"Great."

"Don't beat yourself up. It's how he is, you can't change that."

We got up and headed back downtown. It felt like we had been out together all day, even though no more than two hours could have passed. We had gone much further than I thought, maybe eight or nine blocks, and on the walk back neither of us said anything. I followed him to the community center parking lot where his car was, the kind of beat-up white van that scared away children. It seemed appropriate: the van that makes people disappear. After the mess I'd dragged him through, I didn't expect to see him again.

Cal leaned back against the driver's door, fiddling with the keys in his pocket as he checked something on his phone. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know, I think...nothing. Nothing tomorrow."

"I want to show you something. Have you been to the beach at Lugo Point?"

I nodded.

"Meet me there at seven. PM. Is that cool?"

"Sure, of course."

"Good. Don't be late, it has to be at seven. See you soon, Tom."

He got in the van and drove off, black exhaust hanging in the air behind him. The town was quiet. I checked my phone: no missed calls, no messages. I drove home.

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### CHAPTER 3

He was waiting for me on the curb of the parking lot, smoking a cigarette. The sun was hanging low over the ocean, and I shielded my eyes from the low angle of the light as I walked up to him. He was wearing sweatpants and a UCLA sweater, clothes that made him look like he had just rolled out of bed.

He looked up and grinned. "You're here!"

"As promised," I said.

He stood up and stomped out the cigarette. "Good to see you again."

"Yeah, you too." Out on the beach I could see a few people crouched around a firepit, the low flames flickering as the wind stoked them. "I hope you didn't bring me here for a beach party," I said. "I've been to enough of those."

"Fuck no. I thought we could take a walk to the top of those cliffs there."

A low wooden fence divided the parking lot from some semi-wild scrubland, which almost rose into a proper hill before falling into the sea. There weren't any footpaths leading to the top, and the whole area was fenced off up to the shore, with signs warning about erosion and respecting local wildlife. Shopping bags shivered in the wind, snagged on dry, spiny shrub branches, and the tall, dry grass was spliced with garbage. "I guess we can," I said. "Won't it be pretty dark when we head back?"

"Don't worry about it. It's impossible to get lost. And no one comes up here, ever."

I followed Cal over the fence and up a low embankment, trying my best to push away the many tiny branches that swung behind him as he moved forward. The ground leveled out into a

low upward gradient, but it was still awkward picking my way through the bushes. I stumbled more than a few times on the uneven ground, powdery California soil interrupted at odd intervals by tooth-like rocks sticking up out of the earth. There were beer cans and broken bottles everywhere, categorically invalidating Cal's claim that no one comes up here, ever.

The way got steeper and the bushes slowly thinned out until we got to the top of the cliffs. There was a thin band of clear, sandy ground by the edge where we stood, just enough to sit down without fear of falling over. Below I could hear the waves crashing against the rocks, but I didn't dare step up to the edge to peer over. The dirt here was so brittle and dusty, it wouldn't take much to crumble away beneath me.

Cal sat down, and I joined him. If he brought me here for the view, then clawing my way over the rocks and thorns wasn't entirely pointless. The ocean shimmered purple, then orange, then blue, vast fields of color that turned the water into something alien and beautiful.

"I used to come here a lot," Cal said.

"Seems like a good place to go smoke."

Cal laughed. "I like that idea, that you should find a nice place to smoke a cigarette."

"Or weed, I guess."

Cal smiled and shook his head. "No. I used to come here to sleep for the night."

"Oh." Cal pursed his lips and nodded, as if to say *Just one of those things*.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be. It was way better than the alternative."

"You didn't have a friend's place to stay at?"

"Burnt those bridges. Burnt them real good, that was my specialty. You met me, you got to know me, we started hanging out and then..." he made an explosion with his hands. "Boom."

I thought about some of the friends I knew from elementary school. Did they even remember me? There was no way they'd let me sleep on their couch now. Was there ever a point they'd do that for me if I really needed it? Where would I go now if I didn't have a home anymore?

Cal sighed and drew his legs up to his chest. "I hate those kinds of narratives," he said, "but I think I'm glad I went through that."

"It made you stronger."

"Not really. I was already strong. Being strong was part of the problem. Being here...it forced me to think. So, I learned how to meditate. You know when Christians talk about getting saved? They think they know what they're talking about, but they don't. Jesus doesn't save you from yourself. He doesn't reach into your brain and change how you understand the world. After I started meditating, I knew that I was saved for real."

If the memory of sleeping here brought back any pain, he didn't show it. "I know it's different for everyone," he said, and I'm not expecting a miracle, but I thought you might want to give it a try."

"Me?" I laughed a little, but Cal was unmoved. "I'm sorry man," I said, "I wasn't trying to laugh at your practice, or whatever. I just don't want you to get disappointed."

Cal tilted his head. "Why would I be disappointed?"

"I don't think sitting down and focusing my thinking is going to change anything for me. I'm glad it works for other people, but I don't think that kind of thing does anything for me."

"Have you tried meditating before?"

"No, but I don't want to disappoint you when nothing happens."

“Don’t worry about that. You don’t expect anything, and I won’t expect anything. Is that a good place to start, for you?”

The burnished orange light of the sunset made Cal seem younger somehow, his skin smooth and boyish. Sitting there with his arms around his legs he seemed small and vulnerable. If he was nervous or uncomfortable about sharing what he did with me, about being forced to sleep out here and hitting rock bottom, he didn’t show it.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Sure. If it would make you happy. I’m not going to have some big realization or anything though.”

“It’s not about realizing anything. It’s about training how you think.”

“Fine. I’ll try it.”

“Okay. First, turn off your phone. I’m serious,” he said, after I gave him a look. “It does affect how well you meditate.” I complied, and he turned off his own phone in solidarity.

“Good. Now, close your eyes, cross your legs, and rest your hands on your knees. And straighten your back.”

I did as he said. The sun was bright against my closed eyelids and filled my field of vision with orange light in a way that was a little irritating, but I ignored it.

“The key to everything is your breathing,” Cal said. “We’re going to begin by working on that. Start by breathing in slowly, counting to four. Then hold that breath for four seconds, and release your breath for four seconds, and repeat. Keep breathing for four second intervals and focus your mind on your breath. In through your nose, and out through your mouth.”

“I knew you were gonna say that. Can’t I just breathe through my nose? I thought the point was to breathe naturally.”

“No. You are consciously creating a cycle of breath through your body. In fact, if you want, you can visualize the breath flowing through your nostrils and out your mouth as one connected flow.”

I sighed. “Keep breathing in intervals, that’s important.” “Okay, okay.”

I pictured my breath as a blueish vapor, filling my lungs and out through my mouth. At first four seconds seemed like such a long, awkward time to pace out my breathing, but after a while I hardly noticed how long my breaths were. Focusing on the loop of air passing through me, I could feel my sense of the passing of time getting more and more blurred.

“What are you noticing now?”

“Doesn’t feel that weird anymore.”

“Are you thinking about anything?”

I wasn’t, but when he asked the question a volley of fragmentary thoughts rushed into my head. How Cal must be looking at me right now, how he must have looked curled up in the bushes on this cliff, how close the edge of the cliff was and how easy it would be to fall into the ocean, willing or unwilling.

“Breathing,” I answered.

“That’s your anchor. Other thoughts will come, and that’s okay. When they enter your awareness, take note of them. They may come with emotions, or they may be dull and unexciting. They may try to pull you down rabbit holes and make you jump from thought even faster. Instead of getting swept up in these thoughts and feeling them as your own, you are going to watch them come into your mind as if they are not yours. Obviously, they are yours, but you are going to look at them apart from yourself, standing on their own. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.”



“Remember that you don’t have to resist the thoughts. If they make you feel a certain way, don’t fight it, but look at it externally and describe to yourself how it affects you. And, when you’re ready, let it slip away. Or if you come across a thought that is pleasant or interesting, you may want to follow them carefully, without getting swept up in them too strongly. Or you may find yourself centered in a balanced state of calm. There are no wrong paths. The only thing is to not worry about losing track of time. That’s what I’m here for.”

I let myself sink deeper into my thoughts. More and more, the cold ocean wind rushing over me became a distant distraction. The thought of the cliff, though, stayed in my mind. It was still frightening, and as the other thoughts fell away it remained. There was something else, a halo around the fear. Vertigo? Well of course there was vertigo, I was at the edge of a cliff. More like a sense of uncertainty. I let myself be pulled toward this halo, like I was passing over the surface of a small planet and making for something just over the horizon.

As I was drawn further into this sense of almost anxious uncertainty, I felt my body moving closer to the edge of the cliff. It was as if in following this feeling, I was pushing my body forward in space toward the cliff edge. In the back of my head, I knew this was impossible, but the feeling of the edge getting closer felt very real. The panic surged again, but I was surprised how easy it was to remove myself from it, not because I knew on some level it wasn’t real, but because I was ready to accept whatever came next.

With that the sense of motion changed. The ground seemed softer, and then disappeared beneath me, and it was as if I was a speck being tossed around by the wind. I thought about the sparks that flew from the bonfires on the beach, how they flew up into the sky in little corkscrew escape paths, buoyed by the warmth of the fire and snatched away by the cold, damp breeze. I let the thought of my weightless body fall away and pursued this image of a spark swirling in the

air. There was something comforting in the thought of this fleck of burning dust being pulled into the night sky with such force that it has no choice but to accept its fate, burning even brighter in the brief rush of oxygen injected into it before it expires.

Something turned in my chest. A kind of warmth, moving in a slow spiral. Counterclockwise. Was that a bad thing? Wasn't clockwise good and counterclockwise bad? But no, this was an unwinding, a loosening, like a wounded arm being freed of its bandages strip by strip. I followed the feeling in its slow little circles. It felt good, really good, but as intense as it was it did not overwhelm me, because it was already familiar to me.

It was the feeling I got before I was about to fall asleep, one I noticed more these past few months. Something was wrong with my sleep. I didn't have real nightmares anymore. Those kinds of dreams were still there, but there was none of the old urgency. When I was a kid my nightmares were vivid enough to scare me awake, as if the monsters were pounding at my bedroom door. Well into the next day, I could picture in my head every bristle on the werewolf's face, every fleck of dried blood and spit on its jowls as it lunged at me. That reality left my nightmares some time ago. I reached a point where my dreams were so thoroughly infiltrated by my waking life that they were just as dull, just as inevitable. An insult to psychoanalysts, everything presented as it was. Dreams about getting stranded at the airport; dreams where I forgot I signed up for a class and failed it because I never attended; dreams where I went to prison because I signed my SSS form wrong; dreams where I didn't get into college; dreams where I got into college, but when I showed up for orientation they told me my admission was a clerical error. None of these dreams scared me anymore because the compelling force of their possibility was always there with me when I woke up. I could no longer escape from reality into dreams or escape from dreams into reality because they were now part of the same whole, only

differentiated by when they were situated in time. The one escape I had left was that moment before sleep where I could feel my thoughts and senses dissipate into a flat, disorganized hum.

I had thought about the feeling before, but I always understood it as the relief of abandoning consciousness. No anxieties, no awareness, nothing. An absence, one that could be enjoyed the moment before full immersion within it. Now that I saw this feeling from a few steps back, I could see that it was not an absence and not a presence. It was another world. A green flash at sunset, but if the Earth stopped its rotation at the perfect angle to turn the color of the sky inside-out forever.

It took a moment to register Cal's voice when it came. "We're going to work our way out of the meditative state now," he said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," I said. Hearing myself speak was jarring, and I wasn't really ready to stop.

"Good. We're going to gradually bring your attention back to your body and your place in the world. I'm going to mention a part of your body, and you're going to focus on it for a moment. Think about its sensation, its warmth, the blood running through it and so on. We'll do that for every part of your body until you're ready to open your eyes and end the session."

I went along with Cal's guidance, focusing on every body part he said. My face and hands were a lot colder than I remembered, almost numb. When I finally opened my eyes I was startled by how dark it was, the lights of the offshore oil platforms twinkling in the distance against the horizon of the night sky.

"How long have we been going?"

"Long. You were doing well, so I wanted to let you go as long as you could."

I stretched my fingers. They still felt half-numb and leaden, so I put them under my armpits to warm them up.

“So how was it?”

It was dark enough that I couldn't make out Cal's face except for the eyes, glimmering with the faint light of the oil platforms.

“I don't know if I was ready to stop,” I said. My voice still sounded weird.

“It can be overwhelming if you've never done it before,” Cal said. “Meditation gives you access to ways of thinking you can't get access to normally. You see what I mean now.”

“Yeah.” He was right. Even so, talking about it felt strange. He must have experienced something like what I had, and I wanted to share with him this incredible awareness I had stepped into, but I had no idea how to express it.

“Is this the kind of thing that could help you?”

Part of me wanted to laugh, but I was still too far in my head to react. “Probably, yeah. I think that it...yes. It's good.”

Cal chuckled. “Stupid of me,” he said. “I shouldn't be asking questions. You'll need time for something like this. Are you ready to head back down?”

“Yeah.”

Using our phone lights we picked our way back down through the bushes, and this time I did fall a couple of times. When we got back down to the parking lot I did my best to wipe the powdery dirt off my clothes, with no success.

“You'll have to wash those.”

“I know.”

He was leaning against the side of his big pedo van, fidgeting with his keys, a big, shit-eating grin on his face that would normally piss me off. But I knew he was right, and I knew exactly how he was right.

“You good to drive?”

“Of course I’m good to drive.”

“Check in with yourself before you get behind the wheel. I’ll be here a while if you change your mind.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

He shook his head. “You did all the work. Don’t give other people credit for your shit.”

I smiled. “Well I appreciate it anyway.”

I got in my car, and the fact of having to drive home sank in. The idea of being alone in a quiet room was so nice, and the thought of driving through the crowded surface streets at night was so irritating, that I almost took Cal up on his offer. But I really didn’t want to leave my car here overnight, so I put on some music and pulled out of the parking lot before I could consider it further.

When I got home I pressed the garage door button, and as the door slowly rose I saw my parents standing inside. Mom had her arms crossed in a way that suggested nausea more than disappointment. Dad was squeezing her shoulder in that formal, comforting way, pursing his lips and nodding to himself as if to say, ‘I was right.’

I pulled out my phone: 11:34 PM. 12 missed calls. How many hours was I meditating? Was it even possible to go that long and not notice?

They were standing in front of me and slowly stepped out of the way as I pulled in, the way protesters reluctantly move out of the way of an advancing police car on the news.

“Do you remember what time you said you’d be home?” Dad asked as I got out.

“Yeah, around 8:45.”

“That’s a long time ago, Thomas,” Mom said, stepping forward. Her expression was pained, and I might have been sympathetic if she weren’t putting me on a tribunal right now.

“We called you so many times, didn’t you see your phone? Was your phone working?”

“I just saw it,” I said, closing and locking the door behind me. “I’m sorry. I was thinking about a lot tonight and I didn’t even think to look. I didn’t mean to worry you guys.”

“Why did you lock the car?” Dad said, thumbs in his beltloops.

“What?”

“What’s in the car? Why are you locking it?”

I laughed. “Are you joking?” I looked to Mom for support, but her expression was the same. “Dad, I always lock the car. Everyone locks their car. What are you *talking* about.”

“If there’s no problem and you have nothing to hide, why don’t you hand me the keys?”

I was so ready for it to be over that I took the keys out of my pocket without thinking. Then I remembered the dagger. I had completely forgotten about it. It was still there, in the glove compartment.

The keys were out of my hand for half a second before I snatched them back. Dad stumbled back like he was slapped in the face. “No,” I said. “It’s my car.”

He stood there, frozen. Then he started to laugh. Soft at first, then louder, almost joyful-sounding belly laughs. Mom put her hand on his back. “Brian...”

“You know, Tom,” Dad said, “I was on the phone with your grandparents this evening. I was telling them about your admission letter. I was proud of you. And when they asked if I could hand the phone to you so they could congratulate you, you know what I had to tell them? My son wasn’t there. In fact, I didn’t even know where he was, because he hadn’t been answering his phone for hours.”

“Brian, let’s go inside. It’s better if we all sit down.”

He shook his head. “You’re right, Tom. It is your car. And you don’t have to say it, but I know what you’re thinking: you’re an adult now. I respect that. So, you’re right. As a real grown-up, you don’t have to let me inside your car. And it’s great that you have a car, because you’ll have a warm place to sleep tonight, now that you’re no longer welcome here.”

“Brian, we are not making our son sleep on the street.”

“He can park by the curb right there, but I’m not letting him on our property until he shows us respect. That’s fair, right, Thomas?”

“Brian, I don’t approve of this.”

“Only one of us needs to.”

“If you make our son sleep outside, I’m taking him with us to Deb and John’s. Would you calm down and take the boy inside? Let’s all sit down.”

“No, Mom. It’s okay. He’s right. I should come back when I can show him respect.”

I unlocked the car and got in. My ears were ringing. Mom was trying to say something to me, but I didn’t process it. I backed out through the still-open garage door, turning on my brights as I did to make them cover their eyes.

In half an hour I was back at the beach parking lot. I had a feeling his van would still be there, and it was. I knocked on the back doors and he opened them, bleary-eyed.

“Need a place to sleep?”

“Yeah.”

Inside the van there was a bed roll and a sort of mini couch, with a kitchenette to one side. He took the couch and handed me an extra blanket. “What time do you normally wake up?”

“Any time.”

“I’ll set an alarm for 7:30.”

I curled up under the blanket. My body felt tired, but I was relieved. No more lines to cross. I checked my phone and saw a couple messages from Mom.

Mom

11:58

Wait outside. He just needs to calm down and you can come back in. Sorry about this.

We can talk about it more in the morning. Love you.

12:15

It’s okay now. Please come back inside.

12:28

Stay safe.

I turned off my phone to save battery and laid my head down on the lunchbox-sized pillow. One by one, I focused on each part of my body and powered them down in my head, until I could feel myself drifting off, nothing left but the flash of green light on the horizon.





## CHAPTER 4

The next morning, we drove through a Taco Bell and ate them in the beach parking lot, sitting on the edge of the back opening to the van. Cal brewed some coffee in the kitchenette and handed me a cup in an old army tin.

“Sorry my bed’s not that comfortable,” he said.

“It’s okay. I was tired, fell right asleep.”

“So have you thought about it?”

It took me a moment to remember what he was talking about.

“I mean, yeah. It works. I don’t know what you want me to say. But also, I don’t really know what to say either. It’s hard to talk about. I think I’ll keep doing it. I want to do more.”

“How does it make you feel?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“Does it feel good?”

“I think so. Yeah. It was really good, but the feeling of happiness, or whatever, was a small part of it. I’m still working on that. How to describe it.”

“What did you notice about your thinking?”

“Clearer. It also felt like...and this isn’t what it was, but it was almost an out-of-body feeling I got. It was like I could watch my body in this detached way, but it was also moving, and I could feel that. I don’t know. It’s hard.”

“I get what you’re saying.”

I took a sip of coffee. It wasn't real coffee, something else like chicory, but I didn't complain. Drinking something warm felt good right now.

"You have a knack for this," Cal said. "I can tell you get pulled in easy. That's good. But maybe you shouldn't meditate alone while you're still getting used to it. Getting too far inside your own head isn't always a good thing."

"Yeah. I didn't think things like that were supposed to be so easy to get the hang of."

"It can be. That kind of deep inner reflection isn't reserved for enlightened Buddhas. It isn't hard or easy, good or bad. It is what it is. There are Hindu myths about demons that meditate well enough to force the gods to grant them wishes. If you're not careful you can find yourself going down the wrong rabbit holes."

"You're making it sound fun."

"Trust me. It's not something you want to go into without guidance."

"Okay. Message received."

I forced down the rest of the coffee in a few gulps to get it over with.

"Do you like it?" Cal said. "It's chicory."

"It's good," I said, nodding. I forgot that he could see through whatever I said. "I'm not a hundred percent used to it yet, though."

"I'll have to stock some real coffee grounds if we're gonna hang out more often. I have a feeling you don't like instant, either."

I shook my head, smiling. "Don't worry about it. I'm just glad I can stay here. Thanks, man."

"Don't mention it. But, uh..."—he glanced at what I was wearing—"do we need to pick up some more clothes for you? Is that all you brought?"

“Yeah, it’s okay. I think I should head back.”

“Are you sure? You gonna be alright going back there?”

“This was a fluke thing. It didn’t feel real. Never got that bad in the past. I think I just need to see if they saw what happened the way I did.”

“You don’t always have to talk things through. Talking doesn’t always help with these things.”

“Maybe not. But it’s worth a try.”

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Before I started the car I wrapped the dagger in a plastic bag and hid it under one of the back seats. This time when I pulled into the garage it was empty, but their cars were still there. One in the garage and one in the driveway. Even so, left the dagger in the car as I parked and locked the car.

I stepped into the kitchen where they were still having coffee. I forgot how late we all used to get up for breakfast. They looked calm and well rested, and when I walked into the room, they seemed surprised and unsure of how to respond. If Dad was still mad, it didn’t show. He looked surprised, like I really did not live here, and I was showing up unannounced for a visit.

They didn’t ask where I stayed last night. As much as Mom was still on my side, they were still ‘they’, a unit.

Dad’s head hung down, his chin tucked against his chest where his powerful forearms were folded. He was always muscular without having to work out for it, a gene all the men in his side of the family seemed to have but which I never inherited.

He tried to opened up to me about what he was feeling yesterday, his anxiety about me leaving the house and becoming my own man and all that, and the “irrational fear” that

I would abandon him and wouldn't care about him as much. He couldn't let himself reflect on it at the time, but in the back of his head, he told himself that he could take some control of the situation if he pushed me out first. It wasn't how a father should act, and clearly he was the immature one and I was the adult in that situation. He was sorry. In fact, he said the words throughout his presentation to me. That's what it felt like, a presentation, the awkwardness of which was alternately worsened by what must have been prior rehearsal. The words felt strange. I found myself wanting to forgive him, to let the words make me feel something, but they were too alien to make any mark. What did it mean to forgive, to go back to him? What would going back mean?

I thought that coming home like this would clear things up for me, but it only made yesterday seem more unreal.

I don't think I was ready to see Dad open up like that. It made me a little uncomfortable at the awkwardness of it, yes, but it also spoke to an experience, his experience, that I had no access to, no matter how much detail he described it in. But something about it felt incorrect, too. The Dad I had a problem with was the authoritarian dad, the dad that used to lock his bookcases from me and grilled me about report cards. That was who I had an issue with, and that's who I needed to talk to. But now I saw that that person was ephemeral, someone this softer Brian was in his own way afraid of. The more I thought about it, the more it started to anger me. This was someone I had spent half my life building up carefully constructed defenses against, and now he thought he could crawl up to me, mewling and begging, and politely ask if we could make up and bring things back to some imagined normal.

I decided I'd stop thinking about it and just forgive him. I was ready to get out of there. We hugged, and he patted me on the back as if to reassure me, and I broke away to get back to my room as soon as I could.

Mom came to my room that evening and asked if I was okay, and I said I was. She asked me when I was thinking about accepting my admission to Presidio. I said I wasn't ready yet. She said that, you know, it was better to submit early in case there's a clerical error—in the processing of the acceptance, she clarified, not the issuing of the admission itself—so I can be sure I don't lose my place. I said I wasn't sure. I didn't know if I wanted to go this year. Maybe I needed some time to cool off after high school. But college is going to be easier than high school, she said. In college they let you study whatever you want. They don't bury you in busy work. I knew that, I said, but there was more to college than homework, and I wasn't sure if I was ready for it. There were some things I felt like I hadn't experienced yet, that I might not get to experience again if I didn't take advantage of them now. Mom said that's how everyone feels before a big change in their life. It's okay to take a leap and not be sure where you'll land. And college was exactly the kind of world I was waiting for, she said. That's what she thought. That's the thing I felt I was missing out on. Maybe, I said. But I needed to be sure before I said yes. I could tell she didn't want to push the issue, and she left me alone. I was okay with that. My suspicion that Dad had sent her was confirmed when he failed to mention the fact I hadn't accepted my offer from Presidio. I should have felt glad to see him afraid to upset me, to step over my boundaries. I tried to force some sense of satisfaction from it, but it never came.

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## CHAPTER 5

I took Cal's advice and started looking for meditation classes online. They all looked like shit, and I'm not sure what I expected from meditation classes in Southern California. I could barely get through half a paragraph on each site's course description before crystals came up, or chakras, and I closed the tab. Whenever the page loaded in and the first thing I saw was some white woman in a headwrap, I closed it immediately.

Whoever was taking these classes clearly didn't get what I got out of meditation. Not to say that I was Zen master, but what I experienced during meditation didn't make me want to smile benevolently the way so many people in these meditation course photos did.

I was at the gas station scrolling through yet another "wellness" site on my phone when I saw an ad that made me stop. It had a drawing of a black sun on a gold background, with the wavy rays around the edges slowly spinning counterclockwise. Below it, rolling dunes and cacti stretched into the horizon. Below the sun was bold lettering in all caps:

**FIND CLARITY AT SUN RANCH. LIMITED PLACES AVAILABLE.**

Naturally, I clicked it. It took me to an unadorned white webpage with black text:

*If you clicked this ad, it's because the personal data we scraped from your devices matches the criteria we want from new Sun Ranch members. Creepy, right? We can get very, very exact information on you based on how you use your phone or computer. Everyone does*

*this when they send out ads. You already knew that, but here's some tangible proof. That's part of why none of us have smartphones up here. That, and the fact that they're a psyop by the Demiurge to dull our consciousnesses. Only half joking.*

*If you're still reading this on this jank-ass website, that's a good sign. We're looking for people whose attention spans are still intact. I would say I'll get straight to the point, but the point isn't so obvious at first glance, so bear with me a little longer.*

*Sun Ranch is an anti-wellness retreat center. We don't believe in wellness here. Wellness is a word made up so Stacy can feel good about putting crystals in her pussy. What we practice at Sun Ranch is spiritual warfare. Heavy words for something that should be simple but isn't: purging the venom of modern life from your brain.*

*What we offer isn't a vacation, even though you may be familiar with some of what we do in different contexts. What we teach you here is hard. In the classes we teach at the ranch, you will be practicing yoga and meditation (among other things), but not in a "California" way and not in a religious way. Our exercises are designed to take you inside yourself and pull out the cancer at the root. If you are not prepared for how that will feel, you've been warned.*

*If any of this interests you and you want more info, fill out the application in the link below. We prefer to keep things at the ranch low-key, so please understand if we ask you to apply first before we give out more information to those we've selected. This place used to be invite-only from old members, so advertising this online at all is already a stretch for us.*

The mere thought of applying to anything after the hell of college applications nauseated me, but I swallowed my hesitancy and scrolled through the questions. Just then I realized my car

had been fueled up for a long time now and the nozzle was still in the car, so I pulled into a parking space before reading through all the questions.

*SUN RANCH MEMBER APPLICATION FORM*

*All responses are confidential and are only used for admission purposes.*

*Name (optional): Tom Webber*

*Age: 18*

*Do you drink?: No*

*Do you use drugs?: No*

*Do you watch porn?: Yes*

*Do you masturbate?: Yes*

*How much time do you usually spend online per day?: 3 hours*

*Do you eat fried or sugary foods more than once a week?: Yes*

*Do you work out or play sports?: No*

*Do you attend a place of worship regularly?: No*

*Is there anyone you would give your life for?: Probably not*

*Is there anyone in your life who would give their life for you?: Not sure*

*Are you in school? Do you like what you study?: Not anymore, and no*

*Do you have a job? Do you like what you do?: No*

*Do you suffer from addiction?: No*

*Do you sleep at least 7.5 hours per night?: No*

*Do you have any mental or physical disabilities, conditions, or chronic diseases?: No*



*Do you meditate? How often?: Once, I just started*

*Do you practice yoga? How often?: No*

*Have you ever been in a physical fight?: No*

*Have you ever been in a life-or-death situation?: No*

*Do you pray or observe spiritual reflective practices? No*

*What do you want from your life? What do you hope Sun Ranch can do for you?:*

The last question stumped me for a while. I sat there in the car, which was slowly heating up, so I turned on the engine to get the AC going. I could feel the college app part of my brain trying to spit out contrived bullshit. Frustrated, I just typed in the first things that came to my head:

*I don't know what I want from life. I want to be able to get along with other people that I like. I want other people to like me. I want to have a future that won't rot my brain. I want to figure out what I want from college or if I want to go to college at all. I want to learn how to meditate and make the clarity I get from it a normal part of my life. I want to know what I want to do and do it without having to think about it.*

When I hit send, I couldn't help feeling a little excited. I screenshotted the ad and texted it Cal along with the link.

*Tom: Look at this crazy shit I just found.*

I waited a couple minutes until I saw Cal typing back.

*Cal: Can't tell if this is a scam or a cult*

*Tom: Already filled out the form. You should apply too*

*Cal: Please tell me you didn't give them your SSN*

*Tom: Nope. Just a picture of my credit card. Plus the numbers on the back*

*Cal: Do I have to spell out why this is weird?*

*Tom: Yoga classes that aren't run by hippies? Fucking insane*

*Cal: They have zero info on who they are*

*Tom: All they ask for is your email. Don't even have to put your name. Tbh I just want to see what they reply with*

*Cal: Well have fun then*

*Tom: You're not gonna try it?*

*Cal: I'm not telling someone who practices "spiritual warfare" how often I jack off.*

*Tom: Lie then*

*Cal: Fine. I'm making a burner email for this*

*Tom: lmao*

*Tom: Tell me when they respond*

It didn't take them long. The next morning I was in my room checking my inbox on my PC when I saw a new email with the subject line "Tom: about your application". I clicked it.

*Tom:*

*Thanks for answering honestly. We know that a lot of these questions are really personal, but they're important in helping us figure out if you're the right fit for what we offer. Your willingness to answer all our questions sincerely was one of the factors that spoke in your favor. As you could tell from the kinds of things we asked you about, we're not looking for people with any particular skillset. We want people who have issues in their life, recognize that fact, and want to fix those issues. We also want people who realize that the everyday ways set out for us to live a "normal life" are not healthy and actively set us back on our path of self-actualization. We believe you meet both of these criteria.*

*Now that you have been selected, I can fill you in on what it is we do here. The basic components are simple, and you'll already be familiar with.*

*For new members, we offer a week-long program for only \$120. Due to grant funding and a generous endowment, we are able to cover most of our member's expenses and make sure those who need it can afford our courses.*

*This week-long course guides the participant through reflective and action-based exercises to locate and exorcise the aspects of your self that trap you in self-destructive habits. We accomplish this by helping you to identify and cultivate your Will—a concept that was once familiar to everyone but has been shut out of our lives and forgotten—and use that Will to propel yourself into a self-affirming, healthier way of life.*

*Meditation is a central part of our curriculum. However, Sun Ranch takes an active and bodily approach to meditation that may be different from other meditation courses you will have attended elsewhere. Meditative and yogic practices will include active components, including hiking and physical exercise, in which you will apply and embody mindfulness. We will also show you how you can use active meditation to accomplish physical endurance and cultivate an*

*embodied mode of experience that will help you break out of the virtual, image-mediated web that ensnares us.*

*I should also mention that we know how to have fun here, too. We take what we do here seriously, but we're not a monastery, even if we act like it sometimes. I don't want to make it sound too corny, but once you get de-conditioned to scrolling and binging and all that e-cancer, you start to realize again how fun the little things are. I won't stress the point too much in case you think I sound like a boomer, but I think you get me. The main thing is, we're not a boot camp. We want to teach people how to be alive again.*

*You're going to find a lot of people here who are like you. People who are rootless (which is normal) but want to be rooted (not as normal). People who don't want to spend their lives trying to figure out how to crawl further under the boot. People who are ready to deal with their bullshit, and will help you deal with yours, too. Those are people you want to remember and stay connected with after you leave. You won't have heard of them, but a lot of our members have gone on to have some pretty powerful and influential positions with the skills they got from our curriculum. A lot of big-time CEOs, some state reps, a mayor. Two generals I can think of. The point is, when I say this curriculum unlocks something in you, I'm not exaggerating. And the people who share that experience with you are people you are going to want to keep close once you meet them. There aren't a lot of us in the world.*

*If you are interested, reply to this email and I will send you the address of the ranch. As I said, the week-long course for new members is \$120, and we'll send you a payment link if you want to pay now. But you can pay whenever you want. If it wasn't clear before, I'll say it again: we don't do this for the money. If you can't afford this, shoot me an email and I'll send you a quick fee waver you can fill out.*

*Our first course this summer starts on June 1<sup>st</sup>. Please respond ASAP so we can know how many people are coming. I hope I'll be seeing you here soon.*

—C

I read it, then read it again. It was hard to know what to make of it at first, but I couldn't help feel excited. How many people had this happen to them, whether it was a scam or not? And if it was a scam, it was a weird one.

I called Cal.

“Yeah,” he said. He sounded like he just woke up, even though it was past 10 AM.

“Did you get your email yet?”

“The one from that ad? Yeah.”

“Well did you get in?”

“I don't think so.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Here, I'll read some of it for you. One sec.”

I heard some tapping sounds as he pulled up the email on his phone.

“Okay, here's what I'm talking about.”

*“I'm not sure how you found this application. Though you weren't one of the people we invited to apply, I can tell you fit a lot of the criteria of what we're looking for, even if you didn't*

*take this application seriously. That's why I'm inviting you to apply again. Maybe this email will show you that this is a serious enterprise."*

"What did you put in your form?"

"I don't know, just some bullshit. Honestly, I wasn't even fucking around that much. I'm surprised this guy made such a big deal out of it."

"Well, you should apply again!"

"Why?"

"So you can go with me."

"They let you in? Where is this place, anyway?"

"They didn't say yet. I have to confirm that I want to show up and they'll send me the address."

"See, this secrecy BS. Why the fuck do they have to do that? Does none of this strike you as suspicious? Or at least extremely cringey? Like, what is this cloak and dagger bullshit?"

"I should ask you why you're not curious. Also, what scam lets you pay after? *Or not at all?*"

"A cult."

"A cult of what, hiking with your bros?"

"Cults have been made out of less."

I sighed. "Okay, that's fair. But dude, I really, really don't want this to be a cult—which, by the way, is probably not what this is, just from what I can see. But regardless, isn't the shit they talk about on here the kind of thing you and I have been dreaming of?"

“We?” I heard him chuckle, but then he paused to think. “In an oblique sense, yes. But that’s coming from your own head, dude. When did we ever talk about doing something like this?”

“Every day, man. This is the type of escape we both want. Don’t you want to go beyond just being okay with living in a shitty fucking universe? Don’t you want to actually dig yourself out of the shit?”

“Yeah but Tom, the people who tell you they can do that for you are shysters. This is how shysters talk. And shysters reinvent themselves every day so they always seem new. That’s how the game works. Also, the sun thing...it just creeps me out.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The sun symbolism. Anyone who likes the idea of this big, inescapable thing in the sky beaming down at you with this impassive face...it feels like the kind of symbol you’d be into if you have some issues with your dad.”

“Okay. Well be that as it may, even if this guy has daddy issues and is running a cult, don’t you want to see what it’s like?”

“Not really.”

“How about this. You apply to this thing and get in. Then we both go up together and document it. Make it into a little investigative journalism excursion. We take pictures, maybe do a few little interviews, take notes. We tell people before we go *where* we are going and when we expect to be back. Then when we get there, if anything seems off, we get out of dodge immediately. I can fake a medical emergency or something if we have to. Then, we can spend the rest of the week camping in the desert and make a regular vacation out of it. And when we

get back, cult or no cult, we'll have a hell of a story we could publish somewhere, freelance.

There you go. A little vacation, plus a chance to make some money."

Cal was quiet for a long time. "Did you think all that up just now?"

"Yeah."

"Damn. Well I'd want you as my squad leader, that's quick thinking."

"Squad leader?"

"Forget it. ROTC brain."

I laughed. "I would not have pinned you as an ROTC kid."

"Clearly we have a lot left to learn about each other."

"So you'll do the application?"

"Yeah, I will."

"Good. Call me back when he responds."

"Okay. See you, Tom."

I hung up, then pulled up the email that this "C" guy had sent me. I started typing out a reply:

*Hey, C.*

*I'd like to accept your offer. When you can, please send me the address of the ranch so I can plan my trip over.*

*I should also let you know that the person who you rejected but invited to re-apply is a friend of mine. He's a good guy, and I think his interests and background would make him a good fit for*



*Sun Ranch. I also just got my license and don't have access to my own car right now, and it would make things a lot easier if he were accepted so he could drive me up.*

*Thank you and see you soon,*

*Tom*

I hit send. Only a few minutes passed before I got a reply with an address:

1 Sandoval St

Rampart Valley, CA

94819

Otherwise, the email was blank.

I put the address in Google Maps and zoomed in on the location. At first it was hard to make anything out of the swimming mess of beige sand and rock, but after a second I could pick out a cluster of square-ish shapes, couched on two sides by granite rock ridges running north to south. There were two faint, whitish lines that were evidently dirt roads, the only access routes connecting the ranch to anything. One led down to a badly paved road that eventually linked to the freeway, and the other seemed to meander into the desert, before forking off into still more senseless paths.

In the middle of the little valley between the ridges there was one big building, what looked like a traditional ranch house with a porch, maybe two stories high. A couple of trucks were parked outside. Behind this main building was a longer structure, what looked like a stable,

with a small pen attached to it. I thought I could see a couple of horses in the pen, but it was hard to tell. In front, closer to where the main road led into the property, there was a circular structure that was hard to make heads or tails of, which seemed to be roofed at a bunch of weird angles. Hugging the east ridge was what looked like a half-circle of bungalows, not unlike the ones in downtown Presidio and a little strange to see out here in the desert.

The landscape around the ranch was mostly flat, with occasional hills and ridges of beige and white granite boulders. The main road from the ranch weaved between these boulder piles before reaching the closest major town, Rampart Valley, just off the main freeway. As the name suggested, the town itself was just outside a large valley that the freeway snaked through, flanked by wind farms on either side. The town itself seemed to have few reasons for existing: no farms, no casinos, no warehouses or train links. I clicked on the street view option and selected a random intersection: A stucco church, some houses with barbed wire fences, a liquor store, and a car repair shop with a shattered plastic sign. No one was on the sidewalk, except for a man carrying a large garbage bag over one shoulder.

Cal called. "C seemed a lot happier this time."

"You got in?"

"Yeah. He said I have 'potential' apparently."

"Huh. Potential for what?"

"For working at his ranch, I guess. He wasn't clear."

"You don't strike me as 'guy who works on a ranch' material."

"Maybe not, maybe so. I used to dream about being a cowboy when I was a kid."

I laughed, but he stayed silent. I couldn't tell if he was joking, and it stumbled me for a moment. "Did you take a look at this place yet?" I asked.

“Yeah. I knew it was out in the desert, but this place is out there. Maybe I should get the van checked out before I go up, just to make sure we don’t have any problems on the road up there.”

“So you’re still down to go.”

“Yeah. I feel like I’d be stupid to find someone like this and just let it go.”

It felt good to hear him agreeing with me more. It felt like this was the first time I was sharing something with him new and interesting, rather than him teaching me.

“Good to see the brainwashing is working on both of us,” I said.

“If it’s brainwashing it’s pretty fucking smart,” Cal said, almost to himself. “It’s like he knows that we have something in common, something personal. And he says as much, in a way. But it’s as if there’s something even more to it. It’s not just the things we share, it’s the way he talks. It’s familiar, specifically familiar.” He paused a few seconds. “It’s like...I know this is crazy, but it’s like I know this guy from somewhere, like he’s an old friend I somehow forgot about, but he remembers me. And he’s talking in this way where he’s winking at me and waiting for me to pick up on who he is, but it never clicks.”

“Oh. Huh.”

Cal stayed silent.

“Did you mean that literally? That you think you know this guy?”

“I don’t know. I wish I could say it’s just coincidences and the way he words things, but he’s making me second guess myself.”

I wanted to know what C said to him, but I couldn’t bring myself to ask. If Cal had some old friend that understood him and cared about him more than me, I didn’t want to talk about it. Especially if C thought that Cal had ‘work potential’, while I was someone who fit the basic

criteria, I didn't need to hear about why. If this place was just a cult, I shouldn't care about it so much anyway.

"He was really cryptic in my email too," I said. "Seems to love talking in circles and dropping hints and things like that."

"Yeah. Well, he won. I need to see this guy face to face now."

.....

When I told my parents about the trip with Cal, they both seemed concerned, but I knew they were too afraid to push me on it. I told them we were going hiking and camping in the desert, which was as much as they needed to know.

"How well do you know this Cal guy?" Mom asked me, when I told them about the trip over breakfast.

"Pretty well. We went to school together."

"Well, this is the first time I'm hearing about him."

"We weren't that close until now, but I hung out with him. He's a good guy."

"See, I love that," Mom said, beaming. "Even now, you're making friends. Right as high school's ending. I can't wait to see all the amazing people you'll make friends with at Presidio. Aren't you excited?"

"Yes. I guess I am, yeah."

Dad looked down into his coffee, the steam rolling up and fogging his glasses a little.

"If you know him," Dad said, "then we trust you."

"Just be careful, Tom. Don't take any chances in the desert. Stay away from arroyos and places where there could be flash floods—"

“Cal told me all about that. He does this every summer. And his uncle is a park ranger, too.”

“Can I just ask,” Dad said, “why are you doing this now? This is the hottest month of the year, Tom.”

“A challenge to myself.”

“A challenge?” he said, raising his eyebrows. I could tell he was suppressing a smile.

“Yes, a challenge,” I said, annoyed at his reaction, and aware now at how stupid it sounded. “If I can do this, everything else will seem easy by comparison.”

“That’s admirable. I admire that, really. But won’t you be missing a lot? Your finals are over, but graduation? Saying goodbye to your friends?”

“I’ve already said goodbye to the people I care about. And a lot of them will be at Presidio anyway. Graduation isn’t really that important to me. That’s the point of all this. It’s my own way of celebrating.”

Dad sighed. “I was looking forward to seeing you walk across that stage, but I can respect your reasoning. Just make sure you’re back in time to sign up for classes. Sign-ups are in mid-June, right?”

The reminder of having to sign up for classes made my stomach sink. “Yeah,” I said. “June 15<sup>th</sup>.”

“I can help you with that,” he said with a warm smile. “A lot of the professors in the history department already know all about you.”

Each new word twisted my guts.

“From what I’ve told them they really admire you; I know they’d love to have you in their classes. Some of them are competitive to get into. I’m sure if you talked to some of them, they’d be happy to set aside a seat for you.”

“That could be good,” I said, trying to smile.

“More than good,” he said. “A new chapter. You know I’ve told you were made for college, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you know why that is?”

“Because I’m a ‘free thinker’ or something, right?”

“Because you care about the things you read. High school in this country is a curse. I know I’ve pushed you hard on it, and there’s a lot I don’t like about how I did that. There’s a lot that...” he bit his tongue and stared into the middle distance, folding his arms. “There’s a lot that I regret,” he said. “But I know high school is a joke. It makes you absorb information, not knowledge. But whenever I’ve heard you talk about history, or whatever you’re reading about, I can tell you know how to think critically. No one taught that to you. Mom and I didn’t, and you definitely didn’t learn that at school. You taught that to yourself. And that is exactly the way you need to think in college. A lot of these kids getting into Stanford with 4.0’s? They might not fail outright, but they will get a punch to the gut when they have to do real critical thinking. I’ve seen it. Do you know how many angry emails and office hours I’ve had with students like that?”

“Probably a lot.”

“More than you can imagine. And you know what I tell them? This isn’t high school anymore. The library opened a writing center literally for this exact problem. Because high

school is a four-year funnel that crams information into your head without teaching you how to think.”

He was almost starting to get angry, and I was a little taken aback. “Yeah,” I said, “yeah, I agree.”

“And you are allergic to that kind of thinking. The rigid memorization, drilling, busywork. Do you see that that’s a strength you have? A rare one?”

“I do.”

“Then why are you still so anxious about going to college?” Mom said. She leaned forward and squeezed my hand from across the table. It wasn’t unwelcome, but right now the feeling of her hand grasping mine confused something in my brain.

“We’re not that dumb,” Dad said with a sad smile. “We see it’s weighing on you. You haven’t accepted your place, either. Even though the deadline is a week away.”

It took me a moment to get my thoughts together. So little made sense, and this weird, buddy-buddy frankness threw me for a loop. Could they still not see how weird it was, that Presidio was the only college to accept me? *Their* college, the one *they* worked at? Beyond that, how to put into words the dread of everything that came after college? As I traced my thoughts I could feel the lies woven into all the things I could possibly say. I was used to lying, but they were ephemeral, things I could let fall away. Now they were threads in the fabric of my excuses.

“I was nervous,” I started. “I’m still nervous.”

I glanced at their faces. Concerned, almost tender expressions. Love was supposed to flow out of you in front of faces like that. Did people really ‘love’ their parents? Shouldn’t there be another word for it?

“Take your time,” Dad said. “You don’t have to tell us anything. Whatever you want.” I believed him. If I said nothing, he would be okay with it. That was something new.

“I feel like I don’t deserve it,” I said. “With my grades and everything. I get what you said, but that’s how I feel. I don’t even know what I’d do with a degree. Nothing realistic sounds good. And I don’t want to live to make money.”

“But you do believe what we said,” Mom said, “that you have what it takes? Don’t you believe now that you deserve to be there?”

I nodded. “I’m sorry to hear you feel like this,” Dad said. “I would have liked to know sooner, but I know I didn’t make it easy for you to approach me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s okay.”

Dad pulled out his phone and started typing. “It’s your choice if you accept,” he said, “or if you defer your enrollment. But I think if you talk to some of the people I know in the history department, it’ll be easy for you to see that you were made for this environment. Would you consider talking to them?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll consider it.” My phone vibrated on the table, and I saw the list of names and links he’d sent me. “Email them or call them during their office hours,” Dad said. “No need to introduce yourself,” Mom said, chuckling. “They’ll be dying to sell you on Presidio.”

“Even if they didn’t know you from us,” Dad said. “They’ll like you. And you’ll see, there’s not so much to college as you think.”

“Okay. Thanks, Dad. Thanks, Mom.”

They stood up, and I stood up to hug them. Maybe it didn’t make me feel cuddly, but it felt like I could trust them. It felt warm, and it felt good. The next day, I brought my laptop down



to the kitchen and had Mom and Dad put in the bank info for the enrollment deposit so I could accept my admission to Presidio College.

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## CHAPTER 6

Mom and Dad were out of the house when Cal came by to pick me up the morning of May 31<sup>st</sup>, the day before C told us we needed to show up by. We could have left earlier but I wanted to avoid having them meet, as good as things were now between me and my parents. I went outside as Cal backed into the driveway, cutting the engine and hopping out to open the doors so I could throw in my duffel bag.

“Ready for an adventure, cowboy?” I said, crossing my arms and squinting at him like a wise old ranch hand. He laughed and shook his head. “I don’t think anyone’s ever ready to die of heatstroke,” he said. Cal looked more cleaned-up today: a clean shave instead of his usual stubble, freshly laundered clothes, no wrinkles. Small, but a difference nonetheless.

“I’m sure we can find some more interesting ways to die in the desert,” I said. He pointed to my bag. “Is that all you’re taking?” I racked my brain, then slapped my forehead. “My fucking backpack. I’m glad you said something.”

I ran back inside and up to my room, where my backpack was laying on my bed. I still had a feeling that I was forgetting something, so I unzipped it and started going through its contents. Chargers, pen and paper, a water bottle, a camera with an extended lens that I’d forgotten how to use properly. A first aid kit and a giant tube of sunscreen that Mom had given me in a plastic bag in case it leaked in my backpack. I turned the bag over in my hands, still unable to shake the sense of unease twisting up inside me. Then I remembered.

I ran down to the garage, backpack over one shoulder, and unlocked the car. Reaching under the seat where I’d hidden it, I grabbed the dagger. Its weight was heavy, certain in my

right hand. I unwrapped it from the crumpled plastic bag just to make sure it was really there, even though the feeling of its weight was unmistakable. Even in the dim light of the garage its gleam was impossible to ignore, the polished steel marred only by the German text running along the blade. I raised it up to the sputtering yellow garage light to accentuate the effect, and for a moment the dagger seemed to be made of liquid gold, casting off rays in all directions. I was mesmerized.

Cal honked, breaking me out of my trance. I wrapped the dagger back up in the bag, stowed it in the backpack and dashed outside. “Were you taking a shit or something?” he said, raising an eyebrow, as I hopped in shotgun. “Couldn’t find my camera. Let’s go.”



We stopped to refuel in Rampart Valley, the last town before taking the old dirt road up to the ranch. Not much had changed from what we saw looking at it online. Except, for some reason, a massive shopping center was under construction on the edge of town.

Cal pointed up at the sky, as he refueled the car. “How long you think those will last?” he said, pointing to a cloud bank coming in from the south. “Maybe a couple hours?” I said. “Out here, clouds are just another way God gets our hopes up to crush them again.”

“You’re right. The sun will kill it by the time we get to the ranch. I’m sweating just from standing here in the shade for five minutes.”

We got back on the road and followed the navigation on my phone onto the badly paved road leading away from Rampart Valley and toward the Ranch. We passed a couple small horse ranches before the paving crumbled away beneath us and we reached the open desert.

The road was not the way I remembered it from online. The satellite image didn't give a sense of how many ridges and valleys it went over, sometimes making the van strain hard enough that the AC stopped working for a couple minutes. A web of alternate roads now intersected with ours, too: some only faint tire tracks, others so like ours that we had to stop, so I could make sure we took the right path.

Almost an hour had passed, and it felt like we were no closer to the ranch. The clouds hadn't gone away either. Now they covered the sky, casting a pale gloom over the bone-like granite boulders and cactus husks sticking up out of the sand.

When the navigation stopped working, we knew we were screwed. Cal had a AAA map of California roadways in his glove compartment, but there was no record of the road we were on. As we tried to make sense of the map the rain came down in an instant, rattling the car as if someone were pouring ball bearings over us. "Son of a bitch," Cal hissed, punching the steering wheel. The rain was so heavy I could barely hear the horn.

"We have to go back," Cal said, reaching for the gear shift. I blocked his hand. "Cal, didn't you see what's behind us? It's ninety percent valleys and arroyos. We'd get swept away. We're better off getting uphill fast as we can."

"Fucking bullshit," Cal muttered as he gunned the engine.

We had been driving slow to avoid spinning out in the sand washes, but now we were reduced to a crawl from the low visibility and the risk of sliding off the road. Even though it was 2:30 in the afternoon Cal turned the brights on, which hardly helped us see through the murk since the rain caught most of the light in a dazzling apparition.

Now we took whatever fork in the road that looked like it went uphill. And, somehow, it seemed to work. We found our way onto a set of switchbacks leading up to the vague jagged crown of the hill. “I think this is it,” I said to Cal, raising my voice over the din. “That ridge up there has to be the one that encircles the ranch.” No sooner had I spoken than I felt the left side of the van slump down, the suspension creaking. Cal coaxed the engine, then throttled it, but the wheels spun uselessly in the wet sand. The engine whined as the rpm gage reached a dangerous height, and just then my vision went white as an ear-splitting thunderclap shot through my body.

As my vision came back, I looked at my arms to make sure I was still in one piece. Cal had his face in his hands, whether because he was crying or because he was still blinded by the flash I couldn’t tell.

“You okay, man?”

He didn’t respond. Just to be safe I reached over, put the car in park, and turned off the high beams. I’d seen Cal cry before, of course, but this didn’t feel like the kind of situation to break him like this. I didn’t know how to respond. I was tempted to give in to my first instinct, which was to say nothing and retreat into my own shell until he came out of it, but the prospect of getting swept away in a flash flood shook me out of it.

“Alright, let’s think,” I said. “We’re probably safe from lightning in here, since the car tires are rubber, right? And we’re already high up. Maybe we can wait out the storm in here, cut the engine and save our fuel. Then we can un-stick the tire when it’s cleared—”

A knock on the window made me jump. Two men in bright yellow rain ponchos were peering in through my window, shielding their faces with their hands as they peered in. They kept moving their heads around, as if they couldn’t see where we were inside the car. I glanced back at Cal to see if he was registering what was going on. He raised his head slowly, as if

waking up from sleeping in class, to look in the direction of the knocking. “Are you fucking seeing this?” I said, pointing at the window. The men—really, they could have been teenagers—knocked even faster when Cal met their gaze, pointing downward with frantic gestures. “I’m not rolling down the window, it’s pouring out there!” I shouted through the glass. They kept knocking and pointing, their eyes wide as saucers. Their smooth, pale faces were so similar they had to be brothers. Maybe twins.

“God damn it,” I muttered, cranking down the window. Instantly I was soaked, the warm water making my shirt cling to my chest. “This is private property,” said the one on the right.

“I know it’s private property,” I replied. “We’re trying to get into this private property because we were invited.”

At this they grinned. “Us too,” they said in unison, as if saying we’d gone to the same school. “So you’re also in the program?” They shook their heads. “We’re not in a program,” one of them said. “We’re security guards.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “Security? You two? Security from what threat?” “Mountain lions,” one said, gravely. “*Mountain lions!*” I said, almost shrieking with laughter. I knew these guys were our only hope of getting out of here, but I couldn’t control myself. “Cal, are you hearing this?”

Cal looked shut off, dissociated. If he had been crying earlier, he hid it well. His eyes were staring into the distance just between the two boys in raincoats. “Isn’t that your truck there?” he said, pointing ahead of us. About a hundred feet in front of us was a truck I’d somehow missed until now. It was a brand-new black Chevy, the lightest mud spatters visible along its sides. “Yes, it’s ours,” one said. “And you two are also trying to get to the ranch, even though you’re driving *from* the ranch?” Cal said. The boys turned to each other, half-whispering. “Is the ranch up there?” “I didn’t see a ranch, was there a ranch?”

“Look,” said Cal, “I’m sure that truck of yours has a tow line. Why don’t you pull us out of this rut and we can head up to the ranch together?”

“We’ll need to see some ID first,” one said, both folding their arms. “ID?” I said. “You’re not cops. We don’t need to show you shit.”

“Curtis says all new members need to have their IDs checked before they can enter,” said one. “If you can’t do that for us, we can’t let you stay on ranch premises.” Cal and I glanced at each other. We both knew it had to be the C. from the emails. “Fine,” Cal said, handing over his license. I sighed and handed over mine as well. One of the boys leapt onto the step of the van and leaned his whole upper body into the car as he snatched away our IDs. The two of them ran slipping and sliding back to the truck, laughing as they clambered inside and started the engine. Cal and I sprang out of the van and ran after them in the rain. I bent down and picked up a rock, in case they tried to drive away and I had to throw it through their windshield. Cal picked up a rock too and we both stood there, unsure of what to do next. I could barely make out a huddled yellow lump in the front seats, shifting like a single blob.

At last, the boys slunk out of the truck and handed us back our IDs. “We can’t tow your van like this,” one said. “The sand is too wet. We can bring you up in our truck for now.”

“Maybe it would be safer to stay here and wait,” Cal said. “It’s unsafe for anyone to be driving right now.”

“That’s true,” one of the boys said, stepping forward. “But it’s less safe to stay out here and wait for a flash flood to sweep you away.” “It’s our job to protect you,” the other said, stepping forward as well. “Curtis said we’re responsible for keeping people here safe. This is a very unsafe place to stay in.” The other nodded and wagged his finger in approval at this point, as if listening to a sermon. Cal looked at me, waiting to see what I would say.

“Fine,” I said. “But we’re taking our things with us.”

“Of course, of course!” the boys said, turning their palms up and gesturing for us to go take our things. We grabbed our things from the van and took them with us into the back seats of the truck, the boys holding open the doors for us like hotel valets.

It was much quieter in the truck, the rain sounding distant and muffled. For what was in theory a work vehicle the interior was sumptuous, the seats upholstered in fine black leather. It was all soon soaked with rainwater, but the boys kept their own sopping rain ponchos on inside the truck anyway. In the front of the truck, I saw the glow of some kind of tablet mounted in a metal brace on the right side of the dash. There was a radio with a corded receiver on it under the sound system, and between the driver and passenger seats where the console would be, there was instead a black-painted metal lockbox.

As the truck started its crawl up the hill, the one in the driver’s seat muttered something into the receiver I couldn’t make out. They talked to each other in low voices, but that too was hard to make out over the sound of the engine and the air conditioning, which was cranked up all the way and freezing cold. I could pick out a few random words, what I at least thought sounded like English words, but it was like they were stringing together random phrases in some kind of game or secret code.

I looked at the wrinkles of their rain ponchos, trying spot any weapons or holsters underneath. Quiet as I could, I unzipped my backpack enough to slip my hand inside and feel for the hilt of the dagger, the sound of the plastic bag wrapped around it mercifully muffled enough to be almost inaudible. Here in the confined space of the truck, a dagger was just as good as a gun, if not better.



Cal watched me put my hand in the bag but said nothing. I kept the backpack on my lap so it hid my hand, while at the same time watching the boys' movements for any sign that they might reach for a weapon themselves. The rainwater in my clothes was already cool, and now in this truck with the AC cranked all the way I was shivering. As long as my fingers were wrapped around the handle of the dagger, I didn't care. The longer I held it, the more I found myself hoping they would reach for a holster, or the glove compartment, or the lockbox, any excuse to lunge forward and sink the dagger into their throats.

I was concentrating so hard on the twins that I didn't notice we had arrived until they cut the engine. The back doors unlocked—I hadn't even noticed they were locked—and I got out as quick as I could, still holding my backpack. Cal got out after me and handed me my duffel bag. Suddenly I felt stupid, letting myself get stuck in a paranoid loop of thought. Was I ready to stab these guys to death a second ago? Practically begging to? Inside the backpack, still half-unzipped, I caught a glimpse of the dagger's blade, glinting in the dull light of the storm. I zipped the bag closed and put it over one shoulder, the strap of the duffel over the other.

We were between the two rock ridges I had seen in the satellite image online. In person they looked even taller. The piled granite boulders formed a broad circle around the ranch like a ruined colosseum, gnarled trees and bushes poking out between the broken masonry. Along the right ridge were the bungalows, marking themselves out with the thin, yellow glow of their windows. To our left was a large, spherical building the size of a barn, shaped somewhat like the Epcot Ball, covered all over with brown roofing and spotted here and there with triangular windows. In front of us was what must have been the original ranch building, a two-story traditional farmhouse, with a covered wood porch out front.

Another peal of thunder rang out, and this time I could see the thunderbolt strike the right ridge. “Holy shit,” I said, making for the house as quick as I could, with Cal close behind. When I reached the covered porch I tried the handle, but it was locked. The twins were strolling over, chatting in their half-English language, one of them twirling the keys around his finger. In the distance, I swore I could hear boulders tumbling down the ridge in the direction of where the lightning struck.

As soon as they unlocked the door I dropped my bags and made for a side hallway, looking for a bathroom or anywhere I could find a towel to dry off with. The twins followed close behind me—finally free of their rain ponchos—frantically pointing at my feet. “Your shoes! Your shoes!” they cried, and I kicked them off since they were full of water anyway. One of the boys grabbed my shoes and ran to put them away somewhere. Somehow the other one already had a mop, and was wiping up my watery footprints as I went from doorway to doorway. The first two were locked, and the third was a laundry room with a washer and dryer, but with no sign of a towel or blanket.

I found the door at the end of the hall unlocked. When I opened it the room was dark, lit only by the blueish glow of a computer screen. Someone sitting behind a desk with his back to me, looking over what looked like an accounting spreadsheet. He turned around, the spreadsheets reflected in his glasses.

“Wow...uh, hello,” he said. “How did you—never mind, can I get you a towel?” He jumped up and pulled a lamp cord, letting me see him better. He had on a green tie-dye shirt with a brown leather jacket over it, and his hair was pulled back into a short bun.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said I looked down at the water I was dripping. “Sorry, I just wanted a towel. Didn’t realize there was someone here...”

“Dude, you’re fine. Have a seat in my chair,” he said, standing up. I felt embarrassed as I sat down, like I was back in the Nurse’s office for a boo boo. When I turned back to the doorway the twins were already there, somehow with towels each in their hands. “Thanks, guys,” the guy in glasses said, taking them and handing me one. “Thank you,” I said, toweling off my hair and trying to pad the moisture off my clothes. “You were really shivering,” he said. “Is that your friend down the hall there?”

Cal was standing at the end of the hall, peering around the corner in his sock feet, bleached white hair clinging to his face. The twins now ran up to him now, offering him towels they seemed to pull out of thin air. “Yeah, that’s Cal,” I said. The glasses guy clapped his hands together. “Great!” he said, bending down to click something on one of his spreadsheets. I caught a few details—names, dates of arrival, some yes/no columns—before he closed the window. “We thought you guys might not show up. Cal, come over here!”

Cal came over and the guy in glasses shook his hand with both hands, something I could tell weirded Cal out a little, but he kept things polite. “I’m Gus,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you, Callum.” “Thanks,” he said, at last extricating himself from the handshake. “Call me Cal.” Gus turned back to me. “And you must be…” he squinted as he thought. “Tom?”

“That’s me.” “Good,” Gus said, beaming. “Curtis is going to be so glad that everyone turned up.”

“Does he live upstairs?” Cal asked, toweling off his hair some more. “Yes,” said Gus. “He’s at the weather station right now, though.”

“Weather station?” I said. “There’s a weather station here?”

“Yup, up on the ridge. Normally we can get readings remotely, but it looks like the storm knocked out the telemetry, so Curtis is up there fixing it.”

“He’s going to die,” I said, laughing despite myself. “We just saw lightning strike the ridge when we were walking in. He’s asking to be vaporized.”

Gus shook his head, folding his arms. “Maybe if it were someone else, I’d be worried. Not with Curtis, though.”

“Who climbs a bunch of rocks in a storm just to get a windspeed reading or something? Why does he care so much about the weather?”

“I’ve asked him the same thing. He’s the kind of person that sees connections between things that other people don’t look at. A storm is never just a storm. But also,” Gus shrugged, “maybe he just wants an excuse to be out in the rain.”

“It sounds like you know him pretty well,” said Cal. “Better than most,” Gus said, leaning side to side in a fidgety way that came across kind of sheepish. “I mean, I’ve been here the longest of the people here. You could say he kind of needs me,” he said, chuckling nervously. “A guy like him doesn’t have time to do all the bookkeeping. He’s always looking over the horizon, you know. I do all the grounded, boring stuff. Handling account books, funding, maintenance. Things like that. And...well, I think he appreciates that. Not that I need any thanks for it. I’m just glad to be a part of this place.”

Cal and I nodded, unsure of what to say next. Gus looked a little embarrassed at saying as much as he had. Another blast of thunder rang through the house, and I could hear the glassware rattling from where the kitchen must have been. “I’m not that important,” Gus said at last, “Curtis is the real brains behind the operation here. I take care of the small things, you know?” “Yeah, yeah don’t worry,” Cal said, putting up his hands. “We get you.”

“What about the twins?” I said. “What do they do here?” I peered down the hallway again to see if they were listening, but they had disappeared somewhere. “Ah, Mason and

Sawyer. Now they're an unusual case," Gus said. "They're jack-of-all-trades. Curtis knows them better than me. I'm not sure if they're actual twins, but I'm pretty sure they are brothers. They do all the little odds and ends on the ranch that I can't do. A lot of the groundskeeping and maintenance stuff."

"They told us they were security guards," Cal said. Gus chuckled, nodding his head. "Well, in a sense they are. They're not wrong about that. They used to be at-will employees here, but I know Curtis recently gave them firmer contracts. So maybe there's a provision in there about security."

"Shouldn't you know about that if you do the bookkeeping here?" Cal said. "Not necessarily," said Gus. "I'm not that big of a deal here. Maybe I overstressed that. Sometimes Curtis does that kind of thing on his own. Also, I can't believe I haven't asked this yet, but what happened to you guys in the storm? Why were Mason and Sawyer with you when you came in?"

"Well, we almost didn't," I said. "Our car got stuck in the sand when we were heading up the hill. The twins found us and drove us up."

"Really?" Gus said, furrowing his brow. "Did they say what were they doing down there?" I shook my head. "They just said they'd been invited up here like us." "And that they protected you guys from mountain lions," Cal added. Gus leaned back against the wall, thinking. "I'll never get their sense of humor," he muttered. "Sorry about your car. You guys must be tired, want me to show you to your place? Do you have dry clothes?" We nodded. "Good, follow me. You can borrow Mason and Sawyer's ponchos, they won't mind."

We got our stuff together and followed Gus out into the rain, him in a proper raincoat and us in our Mason-Sawyer costumes. Even though it was only the afternoon it was still dark under

the blanket of storm clouds. I strained to see if I could spot anything that could be a weather station on either of the ridges, but if there was one, I couldn't see it.

Gus led us to the only one of the bungalows that didn't have any lights on. It was small, with a little porch just big enough to fit a couple of weathered wooden chairs while leaving room for the doorway. For me and Cal, though, it wasn't bad at all.

This time I was careful not to track mud into the house as Gus let us in and handed us each a set of keys. It wasn't as cozy as the main house, but it had all the basics. A kitchen, a living/dining room with a dining table and a couch, two bedrooms with queen beds. The bathroom even had a bidet for some reason. "It's not Palm Springs, but it's functional," Gus said, wincing as if he expected us to be disappointed. "Honestly, this is far more than I was expecting," I said, flopping down on the couch. I heard Cal going through cabinets in the kitchen. "There's already a ton of food in here," he shouted.

Gus nodded. "Yes, you will be expected to make your own meals most of the time," he said. "We're not a big enough operation to afford a fully staffed cafeteria or anything like that. We do grocery runs once in a while, you can give us a list or come down yourself. I hope that's alright with you guys."

"That's perfect, man," Cal said. "Thank you."

Gus smiled, looking down at his feet. "Good. I'm, uh...I'm glad. We'll see you guys at the dome tomorrow at nine."

"The Epcot Ball building?" I said.

"That's the one. Curtis will do the introductory activities and get things started. And later we can have Mason and Sawyer take care of...whose car is it?"

“Mine,” said Cal. “Well,” Gus said, “You can come along and we’ll take care of that. See you tomorrow, guys.”

He put on his coat and slipped out into the rain. Cal came into the living room from the kitchen. “Dude, there is some good stuff in there,” he said, grinning. “Like, how did they afford some of this shit? Where does the money come from?”

“That’s just the tip of the iceberg,” I said. “I have a lot of questions.”

“Do you think he was telling the truth? About Curtis being up at some weather station?”

“It would be a weird thing to lie about. I didn’t see any weather tower up there, but it was hard to see much anyway.”

“I feel like Gus was right,” Cal said, sitting across from me in one of the chairs from the dining table. “Curtis seems the kind of guy who’d love the excuse to climb a rock ridge in a thunderstorm. Also…” Cal leaned his elbows on his knees, resting his head on his clasped hands as he thought. “Do you get the sense that there are no girls here?”

I burst out laughing, rocking back in the couch. “That is not what I thought you were going to say,” I said. Cal was not smiling. “Are you serious?” I said. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t care if there are girls here or not,” he said. “But it does seem weird if you only invite guys to a retreat, and yet you don’t explicitly say that it’s a retreat for men.”

“Okay, you don’t know that they’re banning women from joining. But Cal, why would women come to a place like this?”

Cal tilted his head at me, his mouth hanging open like I just told him I was a Scientologist. “For the same reason guys would,” Cal said, laughing incredulously. “You think there aren’t girls out there who are exhausted with the modern world out there? Or who would want to do the kinds of things Curtis said we would do? Meditation, yoga, hiking, shit like that?”

“I guess,” I said, putting my hands up. “Maybe some do. Maybe one in, like, a hundred thousand. But how many girls have you met like that?”

“A lot,” Cal said, raising his eyebrows. “Really?” I said. “I’m not talking about Lululemon yoga girls, you know. I mean have you ever met a girl who want to kill the Demiurge.”

“I’ve dated two, dude,” Cal said.

“You’re lucky, but you still have to admit they’re not common,” I said.

“I feel like I’m not getting my point across.” Cal exhaled, steepling his fingers as he thought. “If we are here for an activity that is not gender-specific,” he said, “and yet they are targeting men, without drawing attention to that fact, don’t you think that’s a little odd?”

“Fine,” I said with a shrug. “Sure. It’s odd. But come on, dude. You could tell in his messages that Curtis was only talking to men. And that didn’t stop you from coming.”

“No,” Curtis sighed. “It sure didn’t.”

“I get your concern. But dude, is it that strange for guys to want to hang out with other guys? Or for guys to join the same group without saying ‘no girls allowed’?”

“Maybe not,” Cal said. “You’d think it would be different with a professional organization, though.”

“We’ll see just how professional it is tomorrow,” I said, bumping his knee with my fist. He grinned. “Whatever happens, it’ll be worth it for the story,” he said. “As long as I get my fucking car back.”

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## CHAPTER 7

I woke up to the sound of my phone alarm. I grabbed it from the nightstand, turned it off, and checked my messages. Still nothing, still no signal. That was okay with me. The storm must have petered out in the night, because outside it was completely quiet. I set another alarm for fifteen minutes and laid my head down to doze a little longer.

“What the fuck?” I heard from outside. It sounded like Cal on the front porch. I pulled on some jeans and a shirt and scrambled outside.

Directly in front of the house was Cal’s van. Cal was standing on the porch in his pajamas, an unlit cigarette in one hand. “Did they steal my fucking keys?” he mumbled, half awake as he patted the pockets of his pajama pants. “They could have towed it?” I said. He shook his head. “They don’t have a tow truck. I would have heard a fucking tow truck.”

He dashed back inside, and I could hear him moving around furniture and opening drawers. I strained to see if I could spot any tire tracks, but even the van’s own tracks had been washed away by the rain.

Cal reemerged, car keys in hand. “They were on the sill by the kitchen window,” he said, shaking them in front of me. “I never put them there.”

“Jesus Christ. Are you sure? Maybe you left them there when you were checking out the kitchen and you were distracted?”

“I always put them down next to me before I sleep. But honestly, I don’t know, dude,” Cal said, massaging his eyes with the palms of his hands. “You could be right. I don’t know.”

“At least you have your car back,” I said. “Want me to make us some coffee?”

“Thanks, man,” he said sitting in one of the porch chairs. “You can just bring me mine out here, I need a smoke.”

“It’s cool, dude. I’ll sit out here with you.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

I brought us out a couple mugs of black coffee and we drank them together, watching the first rays of sunlight reaching over the eastern ridge. A few clouds still swirled above us, dark and ragged against the golden blue of the morning. “Can’t beat the sun,” I said. “No matter how brutal the storm.”

“On earth, at least,” Cal said, exhaling smoke from his nose. “It’s Jupiter where it storms forever, right?”

“I think Venus is the one with forever storms,” I said.

Cal shrugged. “Good for Venus. Maybe they’ll still be storming when the Sun explodes.”

“I don’t think the acid rain would be worth it. What we went through yesterday was harrowing enough.”

“It would be a lot better than having that thing beaming down on us,” Cal said pointing to where the sun was threatening to rise. “That is going to really suck. Especially this time of year.”

“Yeah. I’m not looking forward to that.”

Like a mole clawing its way out of the dirt, the sun finally pushed its way over the ridge, lighting up the boulders on the opposite side in an orange glow. “There he is, the bastard,” Cal said, ashing his cigarette over the porch railing. “It’s insane that we have cities in the desert at all. Places like Phoenix should not exist.”

“They won’t, soon. If global warming keeps it up.”

“That’s probably for the best.”

We checked all the locks on the doors and windows before we went over to the dome-shaped building where Gus told us to go yesterday. The inside was an open space, with smooth wood flooring and flat pillows to sit on. The enormous space of the dome was free of rafters or mezzanines, letting in light through the kaleidoscope-like triangular windows scattered across the ceiling. The whole thing—the big domed space, the shoes lined neatly by the door (which we added ours to), the narrow streams of light falling from ceiling to floor—gave the place the feeling of a mosque in a National Geographic picture.

Most of the members were already there. They were all young men, from the looks of it between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. From the half-polite, half-jokey way they were chatting with each other, I got the sense that this was the first time all of them had gotten together as a big group.

Everyone stopped and looked up when Cal and I walked in. “Are you the guys who drove up in the storm?”

“That’s us,” Cal said. “We tried to, at least.”

“See there’s proof,” the guy said, pointing at us. “There’s proof Californians never check the weather forecast.”

“Are you not from California?” I said, taking a seat next to Cal in the loose circle. “Nope,” he said. “I’m from Tallahassee.” He was a young white guy with buzzed black hair and a cross tattoo on one shoulder, and he sat with his hands resting on the floor in a way that made him look a little like a monkey. Most of the other people there were white, too, except for a few guys who could have been Mexican or Asian.

“You came all the way from Florida for this?” I said.

“A buddy rec’d it,” he said, shrugging. “He said it helped him, and I trusted him.”

“So you didn’t find out about it through the ad,” Cal said. Mr. Florida shook his head, grinning like he’d brought up a dirty secret. “No, they were telling me about that,” he said nodding to the other chuckling floor-sitters. “Funny stuff. No, my buddy met someone at his job who was involved with this place.”

“Really?” I said. “What job?” “Construction. Like me.” I saw Cal furrow his brow, like this disturbed some dusty memory from the corner of his mind, but he said nothing. “In any case, both of us lost those jobs, so I figured I’d come over while I’m between jobs and do something worthwhile for once.”

“Worthwhile?” I scoffed. “I feel like construction is one of the only jobs left where you really get to see the results of what you’re working on.” He grinned and leaned forward, bending his elbows. “Oh yeah, I do,” he said. “Shopping centers, strip malls, fuckin’...fast food restaurants...real bedrock of society shit.”

“So you’re ready for some spiritual warfare, is what you’re telling me,” I said, and a few of the others laughed. “I’m still not sure how serious he was about that line,” one of the maybe-Mexican guys said, almost a little nervous. “Weirdly Mormon thing to say for a guy like that.” “Well,” Mr. Florida put up his hands, “if spiritual warfare means replacing the shopping malls with more churches, I’d rather keep the malls. But if it means tearing down the malls and letting the forest grow over them, that might not be so bad.”

“Alright, slow down,” said one of the older white guys, pointing at Mr. Florida. “I definitely don’t think he meant it in any literal warfare sense.” “I know, I know,” he said in an appeasing voice. “Just in a metaphorical sense.”

“The door opened behind us and all our heads whipped around. But it wasn’t Curtis. Instead Gus was there, pulling off his sandals with a grimace. As Gus marched to the other side of the room, Cal leaned toward me. “Dead,” he mouthed, pouting his lips in mock sadness.

“Good morning, everyone,” Gus said, sitting down cross-legged. “Curtis was supposed to lead the introductory session today, but right now he’s feeling a little under the weather, so I will be filling in for him today. I think I’ve met all of you already, right?”

Everyone nodded but kept quiet. Looking around, it was easy to see I wasn’t the only one who was unsure of what was really going on. If something was going on at all.

“Great,” Gus sighed. “Then let’s get into it. We’re not doing anything crazy today anyway. If Curtis were here, he’d go through more of the...I guess the philosophy of Sun Ranch, but I’ll keep it simple for now, since we can’t really avoid talking about this stuff. Or...well, yeah, we *should* talk about this stuff. It’s important. It’s at the heart of what we do here.”

The whole time he was talking he was looking past us, nodding his head, as if egging himself on in frustration. I looked over at Cal again. He gritted his teeth, cringing.

Gus exhaled, clapping his hands together. “So, you are all here for basically the same reason. None of us here, really, is that special. Except for one thing: we know that something is wrong. Wrong with our minds, or jobs, our social lives. The way we live today is not the way humans should be living. And we all want to find a way out of that, or at least try to escape it as best as we can. That’s about right, yeah?” Again, we all nodded, now a little less tentatively. “Right,” Gus said, a little more sure of himself. “We don’t work miracles here, but Sun Ranch as it is now is designed to help you fight this...sickness, in a few ways. First of all, we try to help you clean out your mind. In a lot of ways that’s the easiest thing for us to do. We teach you how to be aware of your impulses that are conditioned into you, the kinds of impulses that pull you

into our bad habits, and toxic relationships, and meaningless dopamine hits. Basically, we give you the tools to get un-addicted to misery. The next major part of what we do is...well, to teach you how to live. The word 'consciousness' gets thrown around a lot. We use it all the time like we think we know what it means, and I did too, until I met Curtis. Since I've been living here, Curtis taught me that being truly conscious has nothing to do with isolating yourself from the world to concentrate and think. When your actions flow through you, like you're in a dance and you can move without thinking about what you're doing. Maybe that's hard to get now, but it will be when we get to it. Trust me. When I've experienced it...there's nothing like it."

"But I'm getting way too far ahead of myself. The key to everything, of course, is meditation. Who here has tried meditation before?"

I was a little surprised to see only a few hands go up, including Cal's and mine. "Okay, a few of you. That's normal," said Gus. "For those who haven't, can you tell me what meditation is for?"

"Concentrating better?" said the guy from Florida, hesitantly raising his hand. "Or calming down?"

"See, this is what the common understanding of meditation is," Gus said with an enthusiastic smile. "That's what most people in the West think. And they're not totally wrong, but there is much more to it than that. People forget," he said, drawing out the word with his forefinger and thumb pressed together, "people forget that meditation was first, and always will be, a spiritual practice. Whether you want to secularize it or not, that is what it is. Regardless of what you want it to be. Even more importantly, it is a tool. It is not a state of being, it is a *tool*. And, like all tools, it can be used in a million different ways. You can use a hammer to build

houses for the poor, or you can use it to bash your wife's brain in. The same is true of meditation.”

A few of the students laughed. “I’m serious,” said Gus. “It’s acknowledged in Hindu texts right from the beginning. Demons can meditate just like sages, and sometimes they’re so good at it they get the ability to force the gods to do evil shit for them. World-destroying shit. You know what they taught in Japanese officer schools? Zen meditation. That’s how they taught them to numb themselves against the massacres of civilians. That’s how they taught them to see civilians as just more grass before the scythe. Through meditation. That’s what I mean when I say meditation is a tool. It can dull your mind just as easily as it can sharpen it. But: that is how you know it’s *real*. Real power has no inherent attachment to good or bad. It just *is*. And that, gentlemen, is what they’ve taken from us.”

Gus let the point hang in the air. I couldn’t tell if the smirk on his face was him being ironic, or if he was serious about the whole ‘real power’ thing. The way he was speaking now was so unlike the person I met yesterday, so unlike the person that walked into the room a few minutes ago, it caught me off guard, and I wasn’t sure if I should laugh or be impressed. The way he spoke was like he knew exactly what to say and in what order; almost like he was saying it from memory, if it weren’t for the fact that he reacted to us so fluidly.

“So, which kind are we learning?” Mr. Florida said with a nervous chuckle, his eyes darting around the room like he was trying to read how the others were taking this. “Are we learning the build houses for the poor meditation, or the kill your wife meditation?”

“Neither,” said Gus. “Like I said, it’s a tool. It is power in itself. *That* is what we aim to give you. Whatever you want to do with meditation, once you master it, is your business. And if

you don't know what you want out of meditation, the process of mastering meditation can help you discover that too."

Next to me, Cal raised his hand. "Forgive me if this seems blunt," he said, "but exactly what kind of power are we talking about here? I've practiced meditation for a few years, and I have to say, 'power' is not the first word that comes to mind when I think about what meditation does for me."

"A fair question," said Gus. "What do I mean by power? I'm not talking about crazy shit. You're not going to cure your cancer by meditating. What you can do, though, is unlock the full potential of your will. That's an idea that I don't expect any of you to fully understand if you haven't gone through it before, simply because the way your wills are now already limits what you can understand about their potential. But once you break off the shackles keeping your will imprisoned, all the obstacles you face in life will seem like nothing. You'll discover things about yourself that you didn't even know were possible. There's even more to meditation than that; and, again, I don't expect you to understand the importance of this now, since it's not something you can grasp until you've experienced it. But it's a good question, Cal. By the way, everyone, this Callum," Gus said, stretching out his hand towards Cal. If Cal was happy for the recognition, he did not show it.

"But, yeah...anyway, that's enough philosophizing," Gus said. He shook his head, as if trying to wake himself up. "Let's practice some actual meditation. I kind of wish I didn't say anything about it first. I feel like I might have hyped it up too much for you guys. We're going to start with a very basic guided meditation."

Gus walked us through the first steps of everything I'd already learned with Cal: sitting position, breathing technique, mindfulness of each passing thought. As I followed the opening



steps and my breathing became slower and more regular, my body started to sink further into the placeless, weightless depth I remembered from last time.

He left us in silence for a moment, maybe for a few minutes, as we drifted into the first stages of meditation. The thoughts flitting through my head were still light and delicate, none of them able to impose themselves on me with any real force. I was still grounded in the concentration of pacing out the intake expulsion of breath from my body.

“By now, you have probably felt quite a few distracting thoughts try to creep their way into your head while you focus on your breathing,” Gus said. “This is normal. As long as you focus on your breathing, These thoughts will remain weak. Notice how they bob in and out of your awareness, like fish leaping out of a stream. They’re small at the moment, but if you weren’t looking at them now, they might easily grow to monstrous size and guide your actions without you even realizing it. But all these thoughts, pleasant or disturbing, are nothing more than extensions of your will. As long as you assert yourself over them, they have no choice but to yield to you.

“This part should not be too difficult. The next part of what we are going to do will be a little more difficult, and it’s okay if it doesn’t work for you today. We are only practicing.

“First, we are going to slowly let go of your breathing. Watch as the process carries on without you, at the pace that you set for it, without your instruction. Your breathing is part of an ancient process, stretching back in time far beyond your ability to comprehend. It is an expression of the will to live that is at the core of all of us. It is the fundamental truth of who you are: your right to live, and to fight against death at all costs.”

I let go of my conscious breathing like Gus said, watching the automatic process from a distance. There was something peaceful and reassuring about it, like watching someone who was

asleep, dead to the problems of the world. I didn't feel the sacred awe that Gus seemed to give it, but it felt like a firm anchor, which seemed to be the important part.

“While holding onto the awareness of your automatic breathing, you are going to look above you in your mind. You're going to imagine your thoughts flying above you on kite strings. They are tied to you: connected to you, but separate.”

I looked upward in my mind and watched my thoughts, like Gus said. My mind had put me down in the sand outside. The two rock ridges framed a darkening sky where my flimsy-looking kites trembled in the wind, lightning already lunging down at them from the curdled, gray clouds.

“Now, you are going to choose one of these kites. Maybe it's an interesting thought, maybe a fun one, maybe a disturbing one. Then, you are going to picture yourself slowly pulling down the kite until it is just a couple feet from you. You can look at it as long as you want. Consider why it's there, if it makes you feel good or bad, and why. Whenever you're done, you are going to gradually let it float back up and join the others. Then, you are going to take a knife from your pocket, cut the lines, and let them all float away into the distance. Then you can open your eyes.”

I tried to focus on any one of the kites, but the wind kept getting stronger. It was strange, because if this was supposed to reflect my memories of yesterday's storm, the wind would have been barely noticeable. The kite strings were getting tangled together now, threatening to become one tree-like mass. At random, I chose one of the few lines that wasn't tangled with the others and pulled it down to me, fighting against the force of the gale.

When I got it down to eye level, I could finally pick out a few of its details. There was a texture like cauliflower, but brittle and hard. Then I could see it: white and rounded on the part I could see, thin, black fissures crisscrossing its surface.

I could tell that it was inside some viscous, amber-colored fluid, and this behind a pane of glass. Now I could tell where I was. This was a memory of a visit to the medical museum associated with Presidio College. I watched as in the memory I walked around the glass case to see the other side of the jar, where the distinguishable features of a skull were hidden behind the mass of bone. My dad was next to me, and he was explaining to me the condition that the person with this skull had suffered from, but the sight of the skull itself was stopping me from absorbing anything he said. I stepped closer to get a better look, to see if I could make any sense of it, if there was any pattern in the cauliflower shape of the skull. Now I could see why this memory had come back to me. The surface of the skull, brittle and rough, looked like the surface of the boulders piled high around Sun Ranch. If I reached inside the jar and ran my fingers over the skull, I knew that it would crumble just as easily as the rocks did here in the desert.

As the wind picked up again, I let go of the memory so that the gust could carry it away. But the memory had become the skull itself, and when I let go it fell to the ground with a hollow thud. A high, screech-like whistle came from its eye sockets as the gale rushed over us, and then it came from all sides. The ridges were dim and indistinct in the dark, but I knew that if I looked closely at them, I would see that they also had eye sockets in them that were whistling in the wind. The kites twisted around each other like dancers around a may pole, twisting their strings together to form one thick, black cord tied around my chest. I could feel the sand shifting beneath me as the kites pulled even harder at my body, threatening to drag me away, beyond the ranch and into the desert. Digging my heels into the sand, I reached into my pocket and felt the

handle of the dagger. The last time I felt it in my hand it reassured me, but this time a leaden dread sunk into my muscles as I pulled it out. This time, maybe because it was in my imagination, the dagger was almost weightless, and as I held it in the air, each grain of sand carried by the wind that touched it caused it to resonate like a long, hollow bell. I slashed the blade through the tangle of kite strings and the mass of kites jerked up into the sky like a puppet on a string, shrinking into a black snudge that trembled and then disappeared.

When I opened my eyes, I saw that everyone else was still meditating. For some reason I thought that Gus would be meditating with us, but his eyes were wide open. When I saw that I'd stopped meditating he lowered his chin and raised his eyebrows at me, as if to say, 'that was fast.' I smiled and looked away, a little embarrassed, and not sure how to feel about what I saw. It took forever, but one by one the other students opened their eyes until everyone was finished meditating.

"So how was that?" Gus said. "Easy? Hard?"

"I did it, but it was hard to visualize for the last part," said Mr. Florida. "It was sort of abstract in my head."

"That will get easier with practice," Gus said. "Today, I wanted to walk you through one easy technique and one technique that was somewhat advanced. Now, I'm not going to ask you what you thought about, but was there anyone who didn't have any difficulties with the visualization exercise?"

As his eyes swept around the room, they stopped on me. In the corner of my vision I saw Cal raise his hand, and slowly I raised mine, too. "Good," said Gus. "That's rare. Can I ask how it made you feel when you cut away the kite strings?"

I looked down at my hands, knowing that if I looked up Gus would still have his eyes on me. “Calming,” Cal said at last. His voice sounded withdrawn, and I couldn’t tell if it was because he was coming out of meditation or if he was being disingenuous. “Me too,” I said. “Calming.”

“Very good,” Gus said. “That is only the beginning of what meditation can do for you. But this session was just an introduction: tomorrow we will do much more. We had more planned for you all today, but...” he sucked in air through his teeth, shaking his head, “The under the current circumstances, they’re no longer possible. So, until nine o’clock tomorrow morning, you’re all free to do whatever you want. Enjoy the last few clouds while they last, it’s about to get hot around here,” he said with a grin, a few of the students chuckling.

With class over, everyone stood and went to put their shoes on, the sound of our collective shuffling echoing back down on us from the huge domed roof. The guys who already knew each other kept a quasi-reverential hush until we got outside.

As soon as I left the meditation hall, I hit a wall of humidity. The sun, halfway up its climb toward noon, was lancing its rays through the ever-widening gaps in the clouds, already thin and tissue-like. The whole valley looked like it had just been taken out of the microwave, warm vapor rising from every crevice in wavering columns. The few Joshua trees on the ranch were giving off so much steam they looked like they were on fire.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned around to see the guy from Florida. “I didn’t catch y’all’s names,” he said. “I’m Jake.”

Cal and I gave our names, and he shook our hands with the enthusiasm of a used car salesman. “They seemed to really like you two in there,” he said with a smirk. “Or at least he did. Who knows about this Curtis guy, but I have a feeling he’ll be the same.”

“Thanks,” said Cal. “We’ll have to wait and see on that one.”

Jake stood there with his thumbs in his belt loops, rocking back and forth on his feet. I don’t know what it was about the impression we apparently made in class, but his attitude toward us seemed to have completely transformed. “Listen,” he said, following us as Cal and I started walking back to our house, “Some of the guys and I were thinking of having a little clandestine bonfire tonight. Not everyone, just a couple of the houses. Four guys, plus you two, if you’re interested.”

“Clandestine?” Cal said. “How clandestine can it get out here?”

“Just meet us at number four,” Jake said. “We’ll show you. Be there at 8:30,” he said with a conspiratorial nod, and jogged to catch up with his group.

“What do you think about them?” Cal said. “Not sure,” I said. “Are you asking if we should go hang out with them? I don’t see why not.”

“I guess I feel a little on guard when I see a clique starting to form,” Cal muttered. “It probably won’t last anyway,” I said. “I think things will be different once Curtis shows up.” “If he ever shows up,” Cal said. “For all we know, he’s a greasy black spot right next to his beloved weather station.”

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## CHAPTER 8

That night, Cal and I walked over to where we thought house number four was, something that required shining our phones as surreptitiously as we could at each house to see which one had a number four on it. The ridges bracketed the sky and denied us the last few red strips of daylight, trying and failing to reach out to us over the boulders. Even through the reds and purples of the fading light, the misty stars of the Milky Way were already visible. That sight was one of those beautiful things in the world whose effect on you was hard to articulate and for which I felt some response was called for, but for which nothing seemed appropriate.

As bright as the sky was, the ranch was not brightened by it. The hollow it sat in seemed like a space designed to capture darkness like a satellite dish, and the few pale windows giving off some light were too weak even to illuminate the sand in front of them. Cal and I walked the faintly suggested trails between the houses following the beams of our phone lights until at last we found number four, which had all its lights turned off. No one answered when we knocked. We were a bit more than five minutes late.

“Oh, come on,” I said. “They left already?”

“Or they’re all inside giggling at us,” Cal said. “Or they sent us to bother some other house.”

But still there was no answer, from Jake or anyone else. I shone my light through the window for good measure, really out of simple curiosity. It was the living room, where a partially disemboweled suitcase spilled clothes onto the floor, next to a half-strung acoustic guitar. Nothing too indecent. In fact, I saw what looked like a bible poking out of the suitcase,

which surprised me; first of all because it was shoved in with all the socks and underwear, and second because none of the people I'd seen at the class today seemed religious in a traditional sense.

I turned off the light on my phone. "Well, that was a weird thing for them to do."  
"I guess," sighed Cal, pacing on the creaky deck somewhere next to me. "Want to head back?"  
"Yeah."

A shrill, cowboy-style finger whistle startled me from my snooping. It came from the direction of the east ridge some eighty-ish yards away—it was hard to tell in the dark—perpendicular to the porch I was standing on. Standing on a boulder, barely visible, was the silhouette of a man with a headlamp on waving his arms to get our attention. I realized the reason I could make out his silhouette at all was not because of his headlamp, but because he was backlit by a faint red light that flickered in the gaps between the rocks, so slight that I wondered if they weren't just red blotches swimming in my vision.

"God damn, they've already found caves out here?" I said.

I waved my phone light back at him. With this confirmation that he had been seen, he squatted down, slipped between a crack in the rocks, and disappeared. "Alright," Cal sighed. "Let's go see what hell pit they've found."

There was no entrance to the cave from ground level. Cal and I had to climb up over the biggest rock before we found a space we could crawl in through, a crescent-shaped opening that descended into the earth at a forty-five degree angle. I lowered myself in, followed by Cal, pulling out my phone light every few feet to avoid flaying myself on the rough surface of the granite rocks in the tunnel. It was not a normal cave tunnel, but rather a set of gaps between



huge, ancient boulders, and I had to push out my mind the feeling that at any moment they could come loose again and crush me between them.

The red light of a fire grew brighter in the I could hear voices echoing off the stone walls, jumbled together like the dialogue of a fever dream. I couldn't tell if they were all talking at the same time or if it was the echo, but it felt as if whoever was down there was arguing, frantically preparing for our arrival.

The voices quieted down as I reached the bottom. My feet hit the soft, silty floor of the bottom chamber and I was able to stand again, stepping aside so Cal could get down. I turned around to see Jake and two of his friends sitting by a fire—it couldn't be called a bonfire, like he'd told me it would be.

The chamber was big enough to fit one of the bungalows turned on its side. We had come in through an opening in the western wall about five feet off the ground, but I could see far above us that there was a football-sized hole in the ceiling that served as a chimney. The cave was, like the tunnel I crawled in through, a gap between several very large boulders, and everywhere along the walls were cracks and openings obscured in shadow, leading to who knows how many other chambers deeper in the ridge. Even though it was essentially a gap in a rock pile there was something strangely regular about this chamber, like a vaulted room in some ruined capitol. It made the three boys huddled around the fire look like war refugees seeking shelter in a bombed-out building, warming themselves as they planned their next move. Their clothes looked the part, smeared with the ever-present beige dust of the desert. Even with the fire going, the desert night was freezing cold, and Jake's two friends were wearing hoodies and held their arms close to their chests. Jake seemed unbothered by the cold despite his Floridian background, wearing only a ratty Motorhead shirt with the sleeves cut off and some cargo shorts.

“Co-conspirators!” Jake said. “Welcome to Sun Ranch’s best kept secret. Or, at least, our best kept secret on Sun Ranch.”

“This is insane,” I said, a little off kilter from the descent and the sudden bright light of the fire. “You guys already found a huge-ass cave after, like, two or three days here?”

“I grew up in south Georgia,” Jake said. “If you grew up playing in the woods, finding caves is just something you do. Come on, sit down.”

Cal and I sat on the other side of the fire, and I found that the sand was still damp with rainwater. Something about Jake’s enthusiastic hospitality seemed to be put on, a little forced, though I didn’t sense any hostility from him.

“Yeah, sorry about the wet sand,” one of the other guys said. “We didn’t think to bring towels or anything. I’m Marcus, by the way. That’s Julian.”

I recognized Julian as one of the few Latino guys I saw in class, and Marcus was a scrawny white dude with long, messy blond hair. Julian was fiddling with a harmonica, peering into each of the little square holes by the light of the fire, as if there was some sacred Old West link between fire and harmonica that would teach him how to play it.

“Were you looking through our windows?” Jake asked with a smirk, leaning back on his elbows.

“I was,” I said. “Was that your duffel bag in the living room?” He nodded. “I didn’t think you were the type of guy to carry a bible around with you.” He cocked his head at me, then laughed. “That,” he said. “That’s a Book of Mormon. I stole it from a hotel in Utah on my way here.”

“Why would you steal a Book of Mormon?” I said. “Puts me to sleep,” he said, raising his palm as he leaned back in a gesture reminiscent of a Roman senator in a movie, reclining at

some feast or other. “The Bible is boring enough. Book of Mormon’s twice as boring as that.” “You don’t worry about your dreams being taken over by Joseph Smith?” I asked. “I don’t really dream,” he said. “I used to as a kid, but not anymore. If I start dreaming again, then that’s a plus.”

“I had some crazy fucking dreams during that storm, dude,” Julian said. “It’s because you make me sleep on that couch.”

“Oh, come on, dude,” said Marcus. “Pull out the bedframe like a normal person. It’s not that hard.”

“The pull-out mattress is even worse,” Julian said, jabbing his finger at Marcus. “The couch isn’t even that bed. It’s those two big windows, man. The glass rattling every time there was thunder woke me up so much, dude. It was worse than the thunder itself. And I think the lightning flashes got through my eyelids in my sleep or something, because my dreams were so weird, man.”

“It’s not the lightning, why would it be the lightning?” Marcus said, like Julian was spouting batshit conspiracy theories. “It’s the ions. The air during storms like that? It’s super ionized. Fucks with your brain chemistry.”

“Shut up, Marcus,” said Jake. “Didn’t you go to college for art history or some shit? What do you know about ions?”

“It was a liberal arts school. They teach you a little of everything, that’s the point.”

“I guarantee they didn’t teach you jack shit about ions, dude.”

“Why are you guys at the ranch?” I said, pointing at Marcus and Julian. “Are you trying to escape Florida like Jake?”

“Do we look like we’re from Florida?” Julian said, laughing. “For the record, I was born in Georgia,” Jake said, holding up a finger from his quasi-aristocratic sprawl on the sand.

“No, we’re Californians,” said Marcus. “There really aren’t that many people here from outside the state, from what I’ve seen. And a lot of those are from Nevada or Arizona.”

“And they’re lucky,” Jake said. “Those are some beautiful states. Nevada, at least. That’s the one I drove through.”

“Not nearly as beautiful as California,” said Marcus. “This place is a cesspool next to Yosemite. You haven’t seen anything.”

“Yeah, but Colorado? Utah? California can’t beat those. We don’t deserve places that beautiful, man. They’re unreal. That’s part of why I signed up to do construction, you know. I thought I’d get to travel a little. Not Paris or whatever, but you know... West Virginia or something. One of those quietly beautiful places, the kind of place that nobody goes looking for. But nope,” he said, slowly shaking his head. “But apparently that’s not the kind of company I worked for. I never went more than two or three counties over for work. All of it in Florida. This thing, this trip I’m on, is the first time I’ve been more than a hundred miles from the place I was born. I’m serious. Until now, my world had been that big.” Jake raised his hand, making a circle with his thumb and forefinger. “I live in a fucking bottle cap. A petri dish. I didn’t feel like that at first, since I moved from the backwoods to a university town like Tallahassee. I thought I’d gone far, like I was in a different country. Driving out here has changed a lot about the way I see that. Like, maybe I never needed a program like this at all. Maybe I just needed to drive across the country to get some perspective.”

He was watching the smoke of the fire twist through the air as it passed through the hole in the ceiling, guided by some invisible wire. “I don’t know,” he said, more to himself. “Maybe

it's just all the driving that makes me feel different. It creates this illusion that the world is this big place that you can do anything in. If you're driving, it's because you're going somewhere, you know?"

"Gives you time to think, too," Cal said. "Especially on a long trip like that. Sounds like you've done a lot of that."

"If I'm being honest with you, I just put all of that together right now," Jake said. "I don't think much when I drive. At least, I can't remember what I was thinking about at the time. Even remembering what I drove past is hard, unless it's a big fuck-off mountain I can't ignore. And even driving through the Rockies they all blended together at some point."

"Highway hypnosis," Julian said. "Puts your mind in a groove."

"That's it, hypnosis," Jake said, sitting up and resting his palms on his knees. "Hypnosis isn't a bad word for it. Is it braindead to say that driving feels really good when you're not in traffic? Just the experience of driving? Don't you ever wish you could fall asleep while driving and not die? God, that would be so nice. Fuck the Book of Mormon, *that's* the best way to nod off."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" said Marcus. "That's a totally different thing. That's sleep deprivation, not highway hypnosis."

"I know, I know. I'm not talking about driving tired. I mean being so unconscious of what you're doing that you're not even awake. You can just go to sleep behind the wheel and let your body follow muscle memory. It would be so much nicer than falling asleep in your bed."

"You're crazy," said Julian. "No one taught you how to count sheep, huh."

"But I don't want to have to think about the sheep," Jake said. "Who wants to think about sheep? I would hate going to sleep if I had to do that every night. I'd rather be doing something I

don't have to think about and sort of..." he let his head droop down and snored like a cartoon character.

"Yeah, and then you careen into a school bus," Marcus said.

"Nope," said Jake, wagging his finger. "In this fantasy, I drive the car while I'm sleeping. Though that's not a bad idea for making sure I die in my sleep when the time comes, I'll have to remember that."

Julian played a series of notes on the harmonica that I realized was supposed to be Taps. "Still working on that one," he said, squinting into its fissures again. "It's a lot harder to play this thing than you'd think."

Jake sat up. His upper body had been half-obscured in the dark, and when he sat up I could see every crease and freckle on his face in the anemic yellow light of the fire. Something about his skin looked porcelain in the glow, like it was smooth enough to reflect the light of the fire. "So, what did you guys think of what happened today?" he said in an almost-whisper, looking back and forth between Cal and I.

"With the meditation stuff?" I said. "I mean, I don't think there was anything that weird—"

"Not the meditation," Jake said, rolling his eyes. "The missing...sensei, or whatever you call him. Curtis."

All three of the cave kids were watching us intently now, waiting to see what we'd say. Obviously, they had already talked about it themselves. I glanced at Cal, unsure of what or how much we should say. It was pretty clear to me that something had been eating at them ever since Jake invited us to the cave, but I didn't trust them enough to immediately spill everything Cal and I knew.

“What can we do besides take Gus at his word, right?” said Cal. He kept a straight face, giving no indication that he thought something might be up. “People get sick. It happens.”

“Oh come *on*, man,” Jake said, his voice echoing against the chamber walls. “Even from how you said it, I can tell you know something’s up. ‘We have to take his word’, ‘these things happen’. Even if he was sick, don’t you think he would at least poke his head out to say hi to us?”

“Unless he’s in town, down in Rampart Valley,” I said. “Or he didn’t feel like it because he was sick. It doesn’t seem that weird to me.”

Jake crossed and uncrossed his legs, shifting around in the sand like he was looking for the correct posture to say what he wanted. At last he exhaled and clapped his hands down on his knees. “One of the reasons I invited you guys here,” he said, “Was because you came up during the storm. Which is insane if it’s true. That was true, right? Or were you guys fucking with us?”

“Yeah,” I said, “we came up in the storm. Not that we wanted to.”

“And also,” Julian said, raising his hand, “I saw two people go into the Big House with Mason and Sawyer that night. Which had to be you guys, right?” “Yes, Julian, I was getting to that if you’d let me finish,” said Jake. “Was that you guys?”

We nodded.

“So my question,” he said with hands pressed together, “is did you see Curtis in that house, or any sign of that the man actually exists? I arrived here three days ago, and I have yet to see him. Not one time.”

“And you’re the only ones they let in the big house,” Marcus said. “I mean, they didn’t ban us or anything, but it’s weird that you’re the only ones they invited in.”

“They let us in because we were soaked and needed to dry off,” Cal said, “but no. We didn’t see Curtis in there.”

“Have you guys ever been up to the weather station?” I said.

Jake blinked and shook his head. “A weather station? What weather station? Why would there be a weather station?”

“All Gus told us was that there was a weather station up on this ridge,” I said, pointing up, “and that Curtis was up there fixing it. Part of it got knocked out by the storm.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Marcus. “Did he say what ‘weather station’ meant? Are we talking about a windsock, or a big meteorological...doppler thing?”

“No,” I said. “Just that there was a station and Curtis was fixing it.”

Jake rested his head on his palms, staring into space. “That’s weird,” he said. “I haven’t seen everything up here, but I haven’t seen anything that looks like a weather station.”

“What do you guys know?” I said. “Did I miss something or is there another reason you guys are freaked out over this?”

“Fine,” said Jake, “fine. You know why I think something fishy is going on here? On my way up here, as soon as I got into Rampart Valley, the fucking SD was on my ass all the way up to that dirt road leading up to the ranch. I have a police scanner in my car, I heard them talking about following me. It happened to them, too. They didn’t have scanners, but the cops weren’t exactly subtle about it. I have never been followed by the cops, dude. That freaked me out a little, I can’t lie about that.”

“And you guys don’t have criminal records or anything like that?” I said. Jake stared at me, then laughed, gripping his sides. Marcus and Julian chuckled, a little uneasy. “No,” said



Jake, wiping his face with his hand. “I do not have a criminal record. I have never given cops an excuse to follow me. Ever.”

“So what do you think the cops want with us here?” Cal said, pulling out a cigarette carton from his jacket. “Did your buddy tell you something about the ranch that might raise the cops’ interest? You were recommended this place by a friend who went here, right?” Cal lit a cigarette and blew smoke up toward the ceiling.

“He said they trained him on how to use a gun.” Cal coughed mid-drag, puffing out smoke like a strangled dragon. “What?” he said, struggling to catch his breath. Jake shrugged, the way one does when they find out their football team lost the match. “I was really looking forward to that part,” Jake said. “But under the circumstances, I’m starting to suspect there’s something up with that.”

I looked over at Marcus and Julian to see if they thought this was crazy too, but they had the same resigned expressions on their faces as Jake. “You guys don’t think that’s weird?” I said. They nodded. “It’s not looking good for them,” Julian said.

“Did your friend say why they were learning how to shoot?”

“I don’t remember, man. I was excited to learn how to shoot in general. Way more than all the meditation stuff. But now that’s all been thrown into question for me.”

“No shit,” Cal said, now back in control of his voice. “Why the fuck are we at a meditation retreat where they’re going to teach us how to use guns?”

“Well in fairness, it’s not just a meditation retreat,” said Jake. “What was the word for it they used? Ghost war or some shit?”

“Spiritual warfare,” I said.

“That’s it, spiritual warfare. But at this rate, I’m starting to worry that they’re trying to train us in real warfare. The kind of warfare that, apparently, the cops don’t seem to like.”

“Are you sure they were ‘training’ him? This wasn’t some skeet shooting activity or something?”

“I’m talking about assault rifle assembly and disassembly, maintenance, target practice, the whole nine yards. But as much as I like shooting ARs in the desert, I don’t like it enough to end up in the clink over it. So,” he said, lowering his voice again, “I was talking with Marcus and Julian about this, but I figured if we wanted to jump the gun on the arms-training stuff, we should try to get out of here tonight.”

“Why tonight?”

The voice made me jump. I looked around the room, to see where it came from, at the shadows in the corners of the chambers and at the opening Cal and I had entered through, but couldn’t see anyone.

“If the guns scare you, you can leave on day five. That’s right before we do the firearms training.”

Then I saw Cal looking up, and followed his gaze to a point on the domed ceiling of the chamber where two booted feet were dangling from a crack in the rocks, a crack that broadened into an opening just big enough to fit a person. He descended the wall so fast I didn’t have time to register it before he was on the cave floor, sitting next to Jake, who flinched as if he were going to scramble back.

“Real quiet now, aren’t you all?” he said. His voice’s edge was tempered by its hoarseness. “You guys were so goddamn loud, why stop now? Why not scream your throats bloody?”

His right eye was ringed with dark circles. At first I thought his left eye was okay, but then I noticed it was puffy and drooping slightly, barely noticeable in the firelight. I didn’t know what to make of it; if he had some weird allergy, or had hit his head, or just looked like that.

Looking at him made my head squirm. He looked young for someone who had a ranch like this, maybe in his late twenties, his flaxen hair sticking up at odd angles like a kid who just rolled out of his racecar bed. His features were soft, his skin rosy, despite his haggard expression and the sandy mud smeared on his jeans and canvas jacket.

“Isn’t it funny that the one thing that’s brought you all together here is fear? You realize that, don’t you?”

He surveyed us with his narrow, tired eyes, turning his head slowly as he looked at each of us. He sat with his back straight and legs crossed, and as soon as I noticed it I corrected my own posture without thinking.

“You were too caught up in being afraid to think about why you were afraid. Speak up if I’m wrong, am I wrong?”

No one said anything. Cal ground his cigarette in the sand.

“The *cops*,” Curtis said. “Just say that word, and people will crawl into the belly of a cave network to plot how they’ll get away. That’s how bad they have you under their thumb out there, isn’t it?”

“But you were gone for so long,” Jake said, laughing nervously, “and we thought that maybe, you know...”

“Maybe what? That I was made up? That Gus killed me with his big, scary gun? That he chopped me up and ate me?”

As the irritation rose in his voice the hoarseness fell away and it became piercing, inescapable, reverberating against the chamber walls.

“You were about to slink away into the night without saying anything to anyone, weren’t you? Not even to save them from their alleged doom? You didn’t even think about them, did you?” He stood up and started pacing back and forth behind Julian and Marcus, who didn’t dare turn around to look at him. “I shouldn’t blame you,” Curtis muttered. “It’s been beaten into you since birth. You can’t help it. It’s why you’re here. It’s the exact conditioning that needs to be broken.”

He stopped and took a deep breath, one hand leaning against the wall. Slowly he laid his forehead against the rock, his fingers tensing. I thought he might claw his nails against the brittle granite, but he wiped his face and continued his pacing. “Let me tell you about cops,” he said, his voice once again permeating the chamber. “Cops are simple creatures, especially small-town cops. They are very easy to predict. Even if you have California plates, they can tell if you’re from out of town. If they see someone in their town who isn’t a local, it is in their nature to follow that person and scrutinize them until they lose interest. That is how cops make themselves feel like they are important, that they are exercising their ‘authority’ and keeping outside troublemakers in line. That is why the cops were following some of you. I guarantee they do not think about you as much as you think about them, and if they knew how much you think about them, they would find it very funny. Even *they* think it’s hilarious how seriously you take them.”

“I can’t get arrested,” Jake muttered. His head was bowed, arms wrapped around his chest. “My mom, she can’t work. If I got locked up—”

Curtis crouched down next to him and put an arm around his shoulder. “We all have things we want to protect,” Curtis said, his voice soft again, so soft I almost couldn’t hear him over the crackling of the fire. “Even if our fear is tied to real things and real people, it doesn’t mean the fear is real. Or good. We can’t help others or ourselves when we give in to our fear.”

He crossed his legs and sat down properly, his restlessness apparently appeased. “The same is true for you all,” he said, “and everyone else on this planet. I don’t blame you. I was like that too, not that long ago.”

“What about the guns?”

Everyone turned toward Cal, who was fiddling with the spark wheel of his lighter. “Meditation, yoga, arms training...Can you see why the third one sticks out? *Why?* Why is it there?” As agitated as he sounded, he couldn’t hide a note of alarm in the last question, something he immediately realized and tried to paper over with a nervous laugh.

Curtis mustered a weak smile, the kind that suggested nostalgia more than pity. “Do you know what the word ‘yoga’ means in Sanskrit?” Cal shook his head. “It means discipline,” Curtis said. “Specifically, a spiritual discipline. Something complex enough that you can’t learn it on your own. You need a teacher to master it. To the Vedic peoples, any discipline that required a teacher was a spiritual discipline, whether that was making an arrow or offering a sacrifice. But above all, the most spiritual discipline was that of making war. Do you know why?”

No one answered. But it was not a rhetorical question, and Curtis let the question hang in the air. He was looking at Cal like he expected him to answer, but Cal stayed silent, looking back at him.

“Because warriors act on instinct?” I said, just to break the silence. Curtis’s head snapped toward me, his teeth glinting in the firelight as he grinned.

“Yes!” he said, clapping his hands together. “The good warrior acts for the action’s sake. He does not think of the outcome. And, when he does act, when he slays his target, nothing else exists in the world. The only thing that exists to him—” Curtis made a circle around his right eye with his thumb and forefinger “—is the eye of his enemy. In that moment, he finds Truth. Not when he sees everything, but when he sees almost nothing at all.” He rested his hands on knees and straightened his posture again, returning to his yogic composure as he directed his attention back toward Cal. “Yoga is and always will be a soldier’s tradition,” he said, his voice measured. “Just as equally, the way of every good soldier is rooted in the yogic nature of power. It is rooted in life. In the body. In action. If you want to master yourself through yoga, you must learn how to exercise your will against the world. That is the only way you can obtain what they’ve tried to hide from you.”

“You mean consciousness?” said Jake. “Like Gus was talking about today?”

“Yes,” Curtis said, still looking at Cal. “True consciousness. They can force us to take shitty jobs, poison our food, fill our streets with filth, get us addicted to drugs and porn and alcohol, but they cannot take away the spark of consciousness hidden in every one of us. Even if they kill us, they can’t take it away, because it is already the very core of what you are. And if you manage to unlock that consciousness, that’s when they get scared. Do you see now?”

“Yeah,” said Cal. “Maybe better than you.” Even though he kept his face expressionless he could not hide a twitch in his neck. Curtis must have noticed too, but he only smiled.

“I thought you would,” said Curtis. “It’s not the kind of thing you can get from explanation. You need to experience it yourself. That’s why I didn’t want to have this talk,” he

said, turning to the rest of us. “Everything I’ve said is incomprehensible, even if you think you’ve understood it. Consciousness can only be grasped through action. I have talked to every one of you, and I know that every one of you has come here because a part of you wants to be free. A part of you wants to purge the poison from your body and find out what it’s like to be a human being. Even if you don’t know how to articulate it, there is a strong will in all of you. I promise you, every one of you has a will stronger than any cop in that pathetic town.”

“Come on,” Cal shouted. “Listen to yourself!” Even Curtis blinked at the nerve of it. But even though he couldn’t hold back his indignation, words failed him. Cal shook his open hands in front of him, trying to force the right turn of phrase to come to him. “This is, this is just... what does this have to do with anything? What do I care if I have a strong will?” He scoffed halfheartedly, glancing at the rest of us to see if we were getting what he was trying to say. “It’s not the issue we were dealing with,” he said, unable to hide the anxiety in his voice. “First off, how can you know if the police are investigating you or not? Do you work for them? More importantly, we were wondering if we should leave because we don’t know if what you do here—that’s something you’ve kept very secret from us except in the abstract—is going to land us in jail. I don’t care about truth or consciousness if the cops are going to come up here and arrest us, or shoot us, or ruin our chances of ever getting a decent job by getting us a criminal record. There’s nothing cowardly about that. It’s called not wanting to ruin your fucking life.”

None of us jumped in to save him, even if it was true. Regardless of how scared we had been, if there was even a remote possibility that the cops were investigating the ranch, then staying wasn’t worth it.

Curtis leaned forward, his face not far from the flames. I could finally see every detail of it. His left eye was even more badly swollen than I thought, and was freely weeping, the skin

lurid and sagging as if it were wax warping under the heat of the fire. I half expected the others to lurch back in horror, but they stayed put. They must have felt, like me, a strange kind of pity for him. It was a pity I'd never felt for anyone before, like whatever he was suffering through was a more acute form of what I too was suffering. Even though I couldn't articulate what that suffering was, somewhere in the hollow of my ribcage a spark of anger flared at the injustice of it.

“You think you know what cops are like,” he said. His voice low, tired. “Let me tell you about cops. I knew a girl in Rampart Valley, a nice girl. One of the few people worth talking to in that town. She owned a liquor store that she inherited from her uncle, a real shithole. Drew every kind of scumbag from ten states away, and barely turned a profit for the trouble. I tried to talk her into selling the place and moving out, but she wouldn't hear it.”

He clenched his jaw and swallowed, eyes darting back and forth as he searched for words. The others no longer fidgeted nervously or averted their eyes, but sat up, giving him their full attention. “What I thought would happen, happened,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “A guy came in with a gun and robbed her. And as he was robbing her, he was telling her how much he wanted to rape her, and that the only reason he wasn't going to was because he didn't have time. When it was over, she called the police and gave them the security footage, the guy didn't even try to hide his face. They told her they'd find him, and she trusted them.”

Curtis chuckled under his breath. His hands, clasped in front of him, trembled as he clenched them into fists. “One week,” he said, holding up a finger. “One fucking week was how long he waited before he came back. And this time he brought a friend. When she saw them, she hid in a closet and called the cops. And do you know what they did?”



His chest heaved and his arms were tensed, like he was ready shove his hand into the fire to prove a point.

“The cops showed up,” Curtis said. “They showed up alright. And do you know what they did? These big, strong, firearm-trained cops, do you know how they handled this situation? They proceeded to sit in their squad cars a safe distance away, while the two men inside broke down the closet door and raped that twenty-one-year-old girl for *three hours. THREE. HOURS.*”

I could feel the words on my skin as they reverberated off the walls, an epiphany rattling in the massive, granite skull of the cave. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

“People across the street said that her screaming woke them up in their beds, and the officers there still did *nothing*. All twelve of them stayed sitting in their cars like it was a fucking tailgate. When they finally arrested the rapists, it wasn’t because they went in and got them. It was because they walked out with their hands up and offered themselves up without a fight. The cops didn’t even pull out their guns. If the rapists didn’t turn themselves in, those pigs were fully prepared to watch them walk into the fucking sunset. They. Did. Not. Give. A. Fuck.”

The others were beyond seething. Jake looked like a different person: his eyes impassive, body like a taut spring, a mechanism whose sole purpose was to expel energy. If a cop was in front of him right now, I knew he would lunge for his throat without a second thought.

“All those cops are still in the department today,” said Curtis. “When that girl’s family sued them, do you know what their defense was? ‘The police have no duty to risk their lives to help someone.’ And they were right. There is no law in this country that obliges them to do jack shit for you. If there was, they would have never joined the police in the first place. The second they meet *anyone* willing to challenge them is the same second they turn and run.”

“So let me ask you all: are you still afraid of these pigs?”

“Fuck no!”

“That’s fucking right,” said Curtis, eyes wide, grinning. “Are you still afraid to learn how to kill, you fucking terrorists? Are you ashamed of yourselves?”

“*Fuck no!*” they yelled, and I realized my voice was among theirs. A small part of me was unsettled at this realization, but it was faint and far away. I didn’t want to think that hard about why I was saying *fuck no*; it felt good to say it. Cal was silent.

“Are you gonna let some lard-ass pigs think they’re the only ones who get to use a gun?”

“*Fuck no!*”

“That’s what I fucking thought,” said Curtis, beaming with pride as he stood up. “You’re good ones. I knew you were good ones. Stand up, all of you.”

Curtis went around to each of us and embraced us. Though we laughed off the gesture’s intimacy, I could tell we were all grateful for it. Curtis was surprisingly strong, and when he slapped me on the back after he hugged me the force almost made me cough. As he got to Cal I thought Cal might push him away, and even Curtis paused for a moment. But Cal accepted the hug. He even smiled, a sad, weak smile that I couldn’t fathom, and which made their embrace seem almost tender. They held each other long enough to make the others look away, shuffling around awkwardly and crossing their arms. For a second I thought I heard Curtis whisper something into Cal’s ear, but if he did, Cal said nothing back as they parted.

Curtis looked up at the hole in the ceiling of the chamber. “It’s time to go back,” he said. “I’m feeling myself again.” I looked up at the chimney where Curtis was gazing. The full moon had appeared over that small opening, drawing the black smoke of the fire into its pale, white glow. I wouldn’t be surprised if the chimney had been carved out by humans for exactly this

purpose, to catch the light of the full moon at its most powerful, adorned with the light of the sun.