

The Just-Enough Club

A Novel

By

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Introduction to *The Just-Enough Club*, a Novel

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“Art is as original and important as it is precisely because it does *not* start out with a clear knowledge of precisely what it means to say.” So states John Gardner early in *On Moral Fiction* (13).

I began the novel you are about to read with only two certainties. The first arose from the musings of a professional rodeo steer wrestler and personal friend on a losing streak between rodeos. He spoke in a measured and enigmatic tone as if testing the weight of the words while driving his truck — the truck that became the fictional truck named “Flatlander” — horse trailer in tow, late one July night as we sped down Interstate 80 through central Iowa.

“Ya know,” he began, “if I won me just a little more, I’d *be* somebody. They’d pay me to do Coors Light and Wrangler ads. Might could even get movie work, be a stand-in as some no-ridin pretty-boy’s double whenever they needed a *real* cowboy. And if I won me just a little less, I’d cash my horses, scrap this rig, and get a regular job. I’d suffer through my forty hours. Then on weekends I’d flour my nuts on the back deck in a pair of geeky Bermuda shorts like my old lady wants me to. But as it is, I win *just enough* to keep me thinking I belong out here. Guess you could call me a charter member of the Just-Enough Club.”

The instant he said “just-enough club” I became certain of two things about the inchoate fictional concept of rodeo that matured into this dissertation. First, I would tell the tale of the “club” to which my friend had just proclaimed himself a charter member. Second, whether in third-person or first-person narration, I would tell it in a voice as close as possible to authentic

one in which my friend and nearly all cowboys whom I knew spoke. While I held no vainglorious notions of writing The Great American Novel, I was confident that with such intriguing material and characters I could write an interesting American novel with contemporary rodeo cowboys as main characters. Long fiction would allow me to explore and, perhaps inevitably *explode*, the Great American mythos that idolizes nomadic men of action, the American cowboy in particular.

Embedded in my friend's impromptu soliloquy were multiple conflicts — financial, sexual, familial, and psychological — that compelled me to explore them in fiction. His words remain so laden with meaning central to my work that they merit explication. First, we note the emphasis on winning “just enough” in one of the only professional spectator sport that requires its athletes to pay entry fees and the considerable expenses of getting from one event to another, often states apart, at their own expense. Why, as one of my characters observing rodeo from the outside asks, would anyone do that? The answer lies more in the mythology, the lure and lore of the “cowboy” in America, than can be observed through the lenses of economics or athletic events. I place “cowboy” in quotation marks because the origin of the western novel, as well as its evolution, seldom deals in any depth, if at all, with men whose importance in any narrative centered on herding cattle and training horses. Instead, the term “cowboy” and the genre “western” began with dime novels featuring variations on outlaws such as Jesse James or professional hunters and showmen such as Buffalo Bill Cody, whose Wild West Show established the pageantry still practiced in contemporary rodeo.

In an essay titled “Power and the Ritual Genres: American Rodeo,” Beverly Stoeltje traces rodeo from its roots: “Buffalo Bill represents the interpretation of the cowboy in performance before large audiences. His Wild West Shows fused the link between the cowboy of the West and the American identity and patriotism, in performance” (149). In Cody's and

similar shows, Stoeltje explains, contract performers were paid a salary and provided transportation (150). Furthermore, in stark contrast to contemporary rodeo, “cowboys and *cowgirls* [my italics] both rode broncs and steers” (150). Also in contrast to rodeo producers and stock contractors that emerged in the Twentieth Century, the early showmen, some of whom took their shows international, “were often in financial trouble” (150), which led Stoeltje to conclude, “Performance seems to have been their purpose” (150). Stoeltje blames WWI first and then the Depression for the demise of the Wild West Show and its economy. She describes the model that initially replaced it as follows:

[T]he production shifted from a group of contract performers, organized and paid by a producer, who traveled together as a unified show from place to place, to that of a local production, organized by a group of businessmen, who hired a producer to organize and advertise a competition of cowboy skills that would attract cowboys and cowgirls who would pay for the opportunity to compete for the prize money. (152)

At first contestants had no organization and no say in a management-labor situation. “[B]usinessmen were in charge and the cowboys and cowgirls were in competition for slim wages” (152). Furthermore, prize money promised was frequently not paid (152). Contestants began to organize into a professional organization, first in 1929 as The Rodeo Association of America, then in 1936 becoming the Cowboys Turtle Association. The latter evolved into our current Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association that holds a degree of bargaining power (Stoeltje 152-53). The PRCA, Stoeltje explains, negotiated sponsorships with major tobacco, soft drink, and clothing corporations who fattened the prize purses (153). It is that type of paid endorsements by sponsors to which my friend alluded. The sponsorships appear in my novel most prominently with the Wrangler 20X clothing models.

Three other revealing aspects of my friend’s comment address masculinity. First, he

speculated that he might become an actor's double for some "pretty boy." Men who hurl themselves from the backs of horses running forty miles per hour onto the horns of galloping five-hundred-pound steers believe themselves more masculine than those who pretend to or who lack the nerve. Second, he said if he won less he would sell his rig and horses and wear Bermuda shorts "like my old lady wants me to." Clearly that remark indicates the lingering residue of the Western myth that credited or blamed the civilizing influence of women on the demise of the romanticized nomadic life of the men.

The most revealing remark, however, requires a bit of decoding. "[F]lour my nuts on the back deck," while seemingly cowboy speak for "loaf," actually cuts deeper into masculinity, scrotum deep to be precise. Anyone familiar with cowboy slang and customs knows that the only time one literally "flours nuts" is when preparing calf testicles for a "nut fry." The testicles are removed with knives to improve meat tenderness and reduce management problems by converting young bulls into steers. In ranch country families often gather socially after working cattle for a "nut fry," at which time the cleaned testicles are rolled in flour and egg, deep fried, and served with deep-fried potatoes, cole slaw, and beer. So when cowboys speak of "flouring their nuts," it is usually an acknowledgement, sometimes in jest, that they have surrendered their manhood to a woman who has figuratively castrated them. My friend's comment, then, runs layers deep in meaning, hope, and fears. While a good many highly accomplished women do barrel race professionally in the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA), rodeo is essentially a masculine world that clings to notions established during the rise of social Darwinism and literary naturalism. Such is the world my novel inherits.

The writer we might title Poet Laureate of the Yukon Gold Rush, Robert Service, articulated in his poem, "The Men That Don't Fit In," what I first saw as the central conflict of my novel: whether one's youth spent chasing the gold in a world champion's buckle would be

validated or wasted. It wasn't a question regarding the cost of "winning the world" that intrigued me. For the rare few who won world championships, the sacrifices would more times than not seem redeemed. My interest lay with the more haunting question of *not* winning world, which damningly demands no less investment of one's time, money, energy, and sacrifice. Service's poem, as I will explain in greater detail below, embodies the naturalistic zeitgeist which birthed the American cowboy mythos.

The Men That Don't Fit In

There's a race of men that don't fit in,
A race that can't stay still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.
They range the field and they rove the flood,
And they climb the mountain's crest;
Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,
And they don't know how to rest.

If they just went straight they might go far;
They are strong and brave and true;
But they're always tired of the things that are,
And they want the strange and new.
They say: "Could I find my proper groove,
What a deep mark I would make!"
So they chop and change, and each fresh move
Is only a fresh mistake.

And each forgets, as he strips and runs
With a brilliant, fitful pace,
It's the steady, quiet, plodding ones
Who win in the lifelong race.
And each forgets that his youth has fled,
Forgets that his prime is past,
Till he stands one day, with a hope that's dead,
In the glare of the truth at last.

He has failed, he has failed; he has missed his chance;
He has just done things by half.
Life's been a jolly good joke on him,
And now is the time to laugh.
Ha, ha! He is one of the Legion Lost;

He was never meant to win;
He's a rolling stone, and it's bred in the bone;
He's a man who won't fit in.

While Service was writing of miners, his contemporary Owen Wister, the man often credited or blamed for fathering the modern western as a genre, was being prepared to write *The Virginian*. Despite the dearth of tall tales and folklore featuring various incarnations of Buffalo Bill and Jesse James in the dime novels preceding it, *The Virginian* remains the ur-narrative for the genre. Yet the 1902 novel, according to critic Barbara Will, was born of a late Nineteenth Century nerve malady called “neurasthenia,” the result of too much mental activity and too little physical action experienced by easterners in the increasingly industrial nation. In her essay titled “The Nervous Origin of the American Western,” Will traces Wister’s novel to his diagnosis as a neurasthenic by Silas Weir Mitchell, the doctor who prescribed a trip west for men afflicted with the condition (293). Another of Mitchell’s famous clients was Theodore Roosevelt, whom Will calls “Wister’s close friend and role model” (295), the friend to whom Wister dedicated *The Virginian*. While Mitchell, “[h]imself a neurasthenic, as well as a novelist of no small repute” (293), advocated lives of “sturdy contests with Nature,” (294) he further prescribed that the men must write their experiences. “Following Mitchell’s lead, a whole generation of men accordingly journeyed westward to recuperate not only by working on ranches and hunting game in the Rockies, but also by writing about their experiences” (294).

Will argues that the genre grew from Mitchell’s double-standard for treating the malady in men and women, which established the sexist nature of western writing that extends all the way to my dissertation. Another of Mitchell’s famous clients was Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman, according to Will, wrote her widely anthologized short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a “defiant response” (293) to Mitchell’s prescription that women neurasthenics not “touch

pen, brush, or pencil” (293) ever again. Moreover, Mitchell advised bed rest and quiet lives at home for women while sending men west to confront nature and record their adventures in a particular style of writing that manifested itself in *The Virginian* as “a new and urgent literary vision of masculine potency and conquest in the face of perceived cultural ‘effeminacy’” (294). This sexism of the cowboy culture and its language manifests itself throughout my novel but nowhere more prominently than in the crude sign the character Charlie Barnes painted in all capital letters on plywood and nailed up in his arena: “This here is a estragin free enviromet, Thank U for not bitchin’” (111). As the preceding example indicates, however, the blatant sexism of my characters veers sharply from the subtle sexism with which Wister portrayed women too genteel to endure nature without a protective man.

I, as did Wister, elected to use a first-person peripheral narrator: Chance Hendrix. Though Wister meant his narrator to function as witness only, I use Chance as a witness participant who is as fearless, powerful, and driven as any character in the novel. Chance defies the convention of Wister’s, Roosevelt’s, and Mitchell’s fully realized man of the West, however, because he writes with introspection and exposes emotional vulnerability counter to the voice of the conventional genre hero. As Wills explains, the ur-narrative of modern Western writing followed Mitchell’s prescription:

[T]he Westerner moves within a sphere of self-contained masculinity [. . .] writing and speaking only when he has something significant — something that *signifies* — to say.

In a similar way, Wister’s novel standardizes the genre in which ‘straight talk’ is equated with clear judgment, moral probity, and certain masculinity. (295).

Those traits I ascribe to the language of my other male characters such as Charlie Barnes, the aging mentor who posted the misogynistic sign, and Spade, whose virility is as exaggerated as that of Randall Patrick McMurphy in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* or Dean

Moriarity in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. In Spade, however, I am again writing against the genre because he is anything but the "direct descendent of the Anglo-Saxon knight" (296) that Will says Wister saw in his hero of the west who brought to the wilderness the civility of the east embodied in the novel's title. Instead of being the man of honor and restraint, Spade is a child of unknown parentage who was raised by prostitutes, one of them purportedly his mother, in a Texas brothel. If readers so choose, they might parallel Spade's lack of known parents to my novel's similar void of literary precedents. As the novel evolved, as my characters confronted or celebrated the technological encroachments on rodeo, I realized that whatever I was writing had lost its literary pedigree, had in fact become a literary bastard. My novel, as I will discuss further below, evolved into an iconoclastic critique of genre and of cowboy myth and lore, particularly the chivalric notions of the pristine west populated by knights in Stetsons, spurs, and chaps. Nor do I portray the rodeo world as do contemporary commercial writers such as Dusty Richards, Mike Flanagan, Jo-Ann Morgan, and Elmer Kelton. Those writers tend to follow the more conventional plots of laconic, pure-hearted cowboys battling injury, drought, alcohol, evil bankers, bad marriages, or greedy developers.

Cormac McCarthy's trilogy, while exposing and exploring the shrinking west, remains centered on ranching, not on rodeo, and although the latest book moves into the Twenty-First Century, it does so only to trace his aging characters as their former world further contracts. My novel, in contrast, features rodeo cowboys who see themselves as professional athletes and who have no desire to return to ranch work or open range. My characters are not the least nostalgic. Larry McMurtry's characters, too, are often lamenting the loss of the old west, whether in *Lonesome Dove* or *Horseman, Pass By*. Although he does address rodeo in his 1970 novel, *Moving On*, I move the genre into the new century of YouTube, cell phones, and rap music as characters are lured by the instant gratification of our zeitgeist. I find my characters most akin to

those populating the works of Annie Proulx, who remains more interested in characters' relationships than in genre or region, although she sets many of her stories in Wyoming.

My passion lies in exploring what Faulkner termed in his Nobel Acceptance Speech "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself," which contrasts sharply with the social Darwinism that informed the work of Wister, Roosevelt, and Service. To facilitate that confrontation, my narrator's internal voice speaks in what Will describes as "the inventive and endlessly analogical discourse of the nervous woman" (295). Although my narrator, Chance, sexualizes women, he feels deeply. In feeling as deeply as he does, he too candidly and completely analyzes the nuances of all characters' feelings, motives, and shortcomings to satisfy the code of the hero that Wister via Mitchell established in *The Virginian*.

Writing anything forces us to make our thinking visible, which then demands that we consider, confess, prove, or retreat from thoughts we may not have known we held. Writing fiction invites an investigation beyond the realm of thought, even subconscious thought, into the domain of pure feeling that dramatization through language may reveal to readers while somehow failing to register with the writer. Catherine Wallace phrases it as follows in an essay titled "Care and Feeding of the Work in Progress" recently published in a recent *Writer's Chronicle*:

Writers say all the time that they were not aware of and consciously intending the elaborate patterns and structures that close literary analysis reveals. And of course writers are not fully conscious of those elements: there is a huge instinctive, intuitive, visceral component to any art. (55)

This draft of *The Just-Enough Club* submitted as my dissertation has reinforced for me the wisdom of both Wallace's statement and the Gardner quote with which I opened.

When writing works of the imagination, I have come to view myself less as a teller and

more as a listener to the voices of imagined people as they speak through me. Each character in this novel, including and especially the narrator, told me things about themselves that I did not know at the time I wrote my Dissertation Proposal Review (DPR). Although most characters in this book have dwelled in my consciousness for decades, only by setting them in motion have I discovered the truths they meant to mine from my subconscious. Gardner's voice yet reverberates even at this advanced stage of the writing because I am still not precisely certain what the novel "means to say." Nor am I troubled by my uncertainty. In the inevitable revision process sure to occur as I circulate the manuscript for publication, readers will recognize and encourage me to develop, or perhaps delete, the "elaborate patterns and structures that close literary analysis reveals" to which Wallace refers and which as yet remain mysteries to me.

I have accepted, albeit reluctantly, the responsibility of working within the tensions Gardner articulates in another of his texts, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. On the same page he juxtaposes, "Art depends heavily on feeling, intuition, taste"(7) against his argument that the writer "must think out completely, as coolly as any critic, what his fiction means or is trying to mean"(7). He further clouds the landscape by writing, "The first and last important rule for the creative writer, then, is that though there may be rules (formulas) for ordinary, easily publishable fiction — imitation fiction — there are no rules for real fiction" (7). Following true to his paradoxes and contradictions, Gardner's chapters that follow offer an abundance of rules to which I have tried to adhere while guarding the autonomy of my intuition.

Narrative Point of View: Call Me Chance

As I stated in my Dissertation Proposal Review, one of my greatest challenges was finding an authentic first-person narrator who could speak naturally in the colloquialisms of cowboys yet be articulate and insightful enough to hold the interest of a general readership.

Gardner speaks to this by alluding to Henry James' observation on first person: "In any long fiction, Henry James remarked, use of the first-person point of view is barbaric" (*Art of Fiction* 75). While saying James "may go too far," Gardner concedes, "[B]ut his point is worth considering" (75-76). A contrasting scholarly point of view that I found refreshing, however, comes from Henrik Skov Nielsen, who argues that a first-person narrator rightly and with respectable precedents offers writers more latitude than conventionally believed. Nielsen presents two hypotheses:

- (1) that in literary fiction, as opposed to oral narrative, one cannot be sure that it is the person referred to as 'I' who speaks or narrates, and therefore that (2) we need to posit an impersonal voice of the narrative. We observe this phenomenon whenever something is narrated that the "narrating-I" *cannot* possibly know, as happens in *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, and other narratives. (133)

In developing his thesis, Nielsen insists that when using a first-person narrator writers hold the same right to free indirect speech as when using third-person narrators. He differentiates between levels of speech by asking, "What is the relationship between the sentences whose words cannot come from the narrating-I and the far more frequent type whose speech is characterized by the knowledge base of the protagonist?" (136). He answers, "[F]ree indirect speech can take the shape of a kind of dual voice even in first-person narrative" (136), and he offers such examples as Melville's Ishmael knowing other characters' private thoughts. Such logical impossibilities cause us to classify our narrators as "unreliable" or — far worse — to lose faith in the writer's control of the narrative. Nielsen, however, citing James Phelan, argues that such leaps are in fact the most reliable: "When the narratorial functions are operating independently of the character functions, then the narrator will be reliable and authoritative" (Phalen qtd. in Nielsen 144). Although my narrator, Chance Hendrix, never fabricates scenes at

which he was not present such as Nick Carraway does in *The Great Gatsby* or Miss Jane does in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Chance does with great liberty speculate on the thoughts and motives of other characters in ways that seem to be more free indirect discourse than knowledge he could possess or even deduce.

I wrote in my DPR that I was particularly interested in the duality of narrator and narrator-character, what I termed the “two I’s” in first-person fiction. Unless the entire work is in present tense, the narrator “I” already knows the outcome of all that has happened. That knowing narrator selects and arranges the form, content, and tone of the narrative. The character “I,” however, is discovering himself or herself along with the other characters in action, none of whom can know the outcome. Nielsen labels the different roles as the “experiencing-I” and the “narrating-I” (138). While I toy with the duality throughout, letting Chance leak in hints of events yet to occur, only at the end do I made a final definitive statement that borders on narrative theory espoused by a character with no training in the subject:

There’s a bunch of rich rodeos left to be won, and even Charlie allows that I might could be just the man to win them. Since Spade died, we’ve tried to talk our way into the future. Still, our thinking too often drifts back to the dead. Charlie allows we’ll tell ourselves the stories of Spade over and over, changing them a little each time, until it makes sense to us. The further we get from it, the more we’ll have to change it, he says, making up what we forgot or never knew. He says we ought not worry over how we tell and retell it to ourselves. That’s personal and matters only so far as how we see ourselves in this world. But he looks at me with those sad dog eyes and says he knows sure as thunder rumbles that I’ll have to tell it to everybody, likely even write it down someplace.

‘Be careful of that, Big Thump,’ he drawls. ‘The way a man tells a tale says more about

the man than it does about the tale.' I tell him I'll keep that in mind. (269)

As my narrator tried to keep in mind what he revealed and how he revealed it, I found myself recalling what Mikhail Bakhtin terms in "Discourse in the Novel," the "heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled, and often multi-linguaged elements" (1194) that comprise a novel's style. Because all voices must come through my narrator, I demand of him not only that he recall vocabulary foreign to him but also, on occasion, that he translate. His translations alternate between subtle shifts of allowing a more knowledgeable character to translate for him and the realm of indirect discourse where the narration slips in a translation that cannot be traced directly to Chance or any other character. Beginning with Chance's own colloquialisms, the other voices he must deliver with accuracy range from Coldwell's polysyllabic verbal histrionics to Charlie's understated laconic musings to Elena's forays into Spanglish when she blends voodoo and Catholicism. Charlie's warning to him about narration, however, is rooted in Bakhtin:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation the word [. . .] exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions. (1215).

Charlie is cautioning Chance to be judicious in selecting and appropriating other characters' words because in so doing Chance reveals his own rhetorical purposes. That is Bakhtin's point when he says that to grasp novelistic style "one need only consider oft-neglected rhetoric, which for centuries has included artistic prose in its purview" (1196).

The degree to which I have the characters make language and storytelling the subject of their dialogue leads to my next topic.

Lies About Lying: Metafictional Surprises

Characters critiquing their own language, combined with the ongoing critique of novel's shifting film modes and plots, reveal that the book is as much about the creation of "art" as about rodeo. One may wonder if my subconscious is telling me that the production of "art," even

manifested in a book by a writer who admires and participates in rodeo, somehow destroys its purity. I have come to wonder if I, like Coldwell, have compromised or parodied the sport by trying to capture it in narrative. While I never intended to write metafiction, I realize I have come close to doing so, perhaps as a stronger protest against “reality” programming than I knew I meant to create. I will again turn to Gardner as I offer his ideas on metafiction, beginning with his definition: “It means fiction that, both in style and theme, investigates fiction” (*Art of Fiction* 87). My novel does this more covertly than overtly through the filmmaker character’s constant desire to create the outrageous conflicts for his film. All fiction writers will immediately recognize Coldwell’s criteria for successful film story lines as the basic tenets of their craft, which seems to qualify the novel as metafiction once-removed. Gardner justifies the rationale for metafiction by saying that storytelling can provide horrible models in fiction that we emulate in real life to our own detriment, one example being the model of Jane Austin’s fiction “that for every woman there is some one perfect man” (86).

For Gardner, then, metafiction offers a means of self-defense:

One way of undermining fiction’s harmful effects is the writing of metafiction: a story that calls attention to its methods and shows the reader what is happening to him as he reads. In this kind of fiction, needless to say, the law of the ‘vivid and continuous dream’ is no longer operative; on the contrary, the breaks in the dream are as important as the dream. (87)

In *The Just-Enough Club* I layer the interruption of the dream by embedding it as a story within a story that share the same title as if to call attention to the artificiality of each. I deliberately interrupt it by having the wiser characters, the survivors, protest and resist the both the demeaning compromises and the lethal dangers the filmmaker would superimpose merely to satiate viewers’ appetites for sex and violence. Ultimately, Spade, the character destroyed by the fiction within the fiction is the one who most accepts artificiality as a truth destined to be fulfilled. These developments were never part of my original vision for the book.

Keeping it Real: Selling the Lie with Setting

I once quipped that I intended to write a rodeo novel so realistic in its depiction of characters and setting that “readers will need to shower off the stink of sweat and horses after reading my book.” I did not make that statement to boast. I made it, rather, because I respect the importance of setting and atmosphere in art as a means of making readers care. Gardner phrases it as follows in *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*:

If it is true that no two writers get aesthetic interest from exactly the same materials, yet true that all writers, given adequate technique, can stir our interest in the special subject matter --- since all human beings have the same root experience (we’re born, we suffer, we die, to put it grimly), so that all we need for our sympathy to be roused is that the writer communicate with power and conviction the similarities in his characters’ experience and his own --- then it must follow that the first business of the writer must be to make us see and feel vividly what his characters see and feel. However odd, however wildly unfamiliar the fictional world — odd as hog-farming to a fourth-generation Parisian designer, or Wall Street to an unemployed tuba player — we must be drawn into the characters’ world as if we were born into it. (43)

Given that the most exciting and profitable element of my characters’ lives remains always in the rodeo arena, one might argue that I needed only to bring the arena experience to life for readers. Or, perhaps more accurately stated to reflect Gardner’s words, what I most needed to do was cause readers to “see and feel vividly” the same setting my characters saw and felt. In large part, I established those elements in the early chapters set at Ft. Smith, which I chose because it is a major rodeo and because it is typical. There I take readers into my narrator’s camper, into more elaborate campers, through the entire rodeo grounds, and into the arena itself.

The following passage places readers inside the gates to the parking area where only contestants are permitted:

I rolled into the rodeo grounds under a scorching mid-afternoon sun looking for Charlie's rig among rows of shiny diesel trucks and horse trailers with living quarters plusher than any place I'd ever called home. Outside those trailers loafed hundreds of fine shiny horses, mostly tied to trailers, a few loose in portable panels, their heads lowered, legs lazily cocked, eyes droopy, and tails swishing, wise-eyed horses with saddle-marked withers who knew patience between rodeos and road hauls. Guys hauling together loafed in jeans or shorts. At some rigs whole families were gathered. I eased past people who sat reading read in fold-up chairs under customized canvas awnings built onto trailers. Kids roped bales. They watched me rumble past in Flatlander, some offering nods or one-finger waves. Inside other trailers folks were campered-up in their air-conditioned chill watching movies, sleeping, having sex, or whatever folks who own rigs like that do to pass time between drives and perms. Because. They. Can. (14)

One can see quickly, however, that the setting is doing more than establishing place. It is establishing the narrator's socioeconomic place within the hierarchy of rodeo rigs as well as establishing his credibility as a tour guide who notices "wise-eyed horses with saddle-marked withers." As Janet Burroway insists in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to the Narrative Craft*, "Like dialogue, setting must do more than one thing at once, from illuminating the story's symbolic underpinnings to such practical kinds of 'showing' as reflecting emotion or revealing subtle aspects of a character's life" (173-74).

I am satisfied that this draft effectively uses setting to reveal character and create atmosphere as well as to convince readers of the fiction's "reality."

Conclusion: Sometimes a Crazy Notion

Without a whiff of irony Gardner titled his concluding chapter of *On Moral Fiction*, “Art and Insanity.” He writes, “One thing investigators of the psychology of creative people have demonstrated beyond doubt in the past thirty years is that creativity has something to do with obsession” (180). In plural first person I will suggest that part of our obsession is trying to know why others think and act differently than we do when we all know that our way of thinking and acting are so much more aligned with what God intended. To answer that question we writers become other characters, allowing ourselves to leap all questions of class, race, gender, religion, and myriad other ways of isolating ourselves. Ursula Le Guin, in *Steering the Craft*, challenges us to abandon our “self” just as method actors do:

It might seem that the writer needs the gift of mimicry, like an impersonator, to achieve this variety of voices. But it isn't that. It's more like what the serious actor does, sinking self in character-self. It's a willingness to be the characters, letting what they think and say rise from inside them. It's a willingness to share control with one's creation. (121)

To rational readers who seldom venture into the domain of imagination, Le Guin's exercise may seem an exercise in madness, an invitation to hear voices. It is. And it is precisely that invitation that prompted me to remark earlier that I find myself becoming more listener than teller. The voices we hear, according to Gardner, reveal the cause of our “madness”:

Art begins in a wound, an imperfection — a wound inherent in the nature of life itself — and is an attempt either to learn to live with the wound or to heal it. It is the pain of the wound which impels the artist to do his work, and it is the universality of woundedness in the human condition which makes the work of art significant as medicine or distraction. (181)

What then, does *The Just-Enough Club* say about its author? What wound yielded a 95,000

word obsession dramatizing the desperate attempt of characters to defy the safe normalcy of the American work force by risking their youth and indeed their lives to pursue the nomadic and romantic notions of a West that vanished the instant it was discovered and never earned the glamour bestowed on it? That question is best left to critics. I will close, however, by saying that the cautionary words of Willie Nelson's song referred to in Chapter One may apply not only to the fictional characters but also to their creator: "And like all the other little children / you've got to dream a dream or two / but be careful what you're dreaming / or soon your dream will be dreaming you."

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Epigraph: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?”
Matthew 16:26

The Just-Enough Club

Chapter One

Near the end of his nomadic life my granddaddy Hendrix tousled my tow head and said to me without emotion, “Them that expect nothing are seldom disappointed, Chance.” I have not decided how he meant it.

Regardless, the man lived and died pure-dee cowboy. He knew dozens of card tricks and enough cowboy limericks to keep bucket brigades passing foamy brews to any scarred bar table where he made camp. What Granddaddy couldn't do was hold steady work, Daddy reminded me, nor tend his family and fields like God meant a man to do. Neither could he call anywhere home unless it had either a grandstand behind the chutes or a white line down its center. And Daddy could never forget. Try though he did, Daddy couldn't clench his Cope-stained teeth quite tight enough to bite back the bitterness he felt toward Granddaddy and his sole addiction — rodeo.

With time I have come to understand Daddy's bitterness. It rose from his having to become — while still a boy himself — a husband to his mother and a father not only to his siblings but to his own father as well. To keep from hating Granddaddy, I suppose, Daddy blamed rodeo instead of the man. And, as if checking for ticks, Daddy's eyes probed me from birth for signs of the rodeo curse. Men with less cause might have turned Granddaddy away that summer when he asked to come die with kin. Not Daddy. His jaw set solid as a hedge corner post, he wheeled Granddaddy to my bed and demoted me to a mattress on the floor. Each night, while the deep bass drone of bullfrogs rode the darkness, I absorbed Granddaddy's How-They-Used-To-Buck tales. Even then I knew without knowing how I knew that one by one he was entrusting his memories to my keeping. They were all he had to leave me. They were all he had. And I felt richer than any prince ever handed the key to a kingdom. Night after night I listened to

remember as Granddaddy whiled away his dying hours spinning smoke rings and rodeo stories between whiskey-laced coughing sprees, laughing in equal measure at life and at death.

Even harnessed to an oxygen tank and an IV drip, Granddaddy's mule-nosed will wouldn't bow to the long-reined tug of death's bit. The hospice nurses who drove out daily from the city dreaded the old man. But on his better days, from his tattered-sofa throne on our screened-in porch, Granddaddy would yell instructions as I spurred my pony through reining patterns between Momma's peonies, truck garden, and glider. Sometimes when Daddy happened along from the fields, I'd see him seeing me spur my pony. Then I'd see him seeing Granddaddy seeing me. And somehow in the unsaid I understood that to Daddy all was as it had been meant to be — which was not to be confused with thinking that all was right or good.

To Daddy's thinking, the gene for prostate cancer was also as it was meant to be. And day by day that summer I felt Daddy surrendering to that catastrophe of character called rodeo, calling to his only begotten son like the calling it was. It had overflowed the dam in the blood Daddy had worked so hard to build and had instead flowed unchecked from Granddaddy to me. Not much given to talk, Daddy had a fine baritone voice he liked to dally round the notes of a hundred country songs. But for the whole summer that Granddaddy lived and died with us, Daddy only sang one song for me, an old Willie Nelson tune called "It's Not Supposed to be That Way":

And like all the other little children
you've got to dream a dream or two
but be careful what you're dreaming
or soon your dream will be dreaming you.

I thought he was singing it for me. But when he sang it at Granddaddy's funeral, curled over his cat-scratched Fender on a tall stool beside the coffin, I understood as only a kid can that the song hadn't been for me alone. I was eight years old, already bad bit by the rodeo bug, and rolling over in my mind my Granddaddy's advice about expecting nothing. I couldn't name what

I expected except in the most abstract notion of “winning the world,” and I hadn’t met the life that would lead me to define its meaning. But I knew that whatever I expected was *not* nothing. I damn sure expected something to come of rodeo, something big and wild and rich as Granddaddy’s stories. That meant, as Granddaddy had cautioned me, that I’d been cursed with the propensity for disappointment — the price of expecting something to come true.

Chapter Two

Sixteen years later, in May of '05, I had cause to recall Granddaddy's words. I'd rodeoed my way to an agri-journalism degree from a modest Oklahoma college by coasting to a C-average. And I won just often enough to keep my rodeo scholarship. I was still roping calves and bulldogging. For the five-and-one-half years it took me to earn my four-year degree, I'd made camp in a barely habitable tin tepee. The swaybacked single-wide was crowned with a row of old truck tires to silence the roof rumble any time the wind blew. And just south of Tahlequah, Oklahoma, that was always. But I was happy enough roughing it. The trouble was that with graduation came payments. I owed for student loans that had kept me in a style to which I ought not have let myself become accustomed. The little money I gathered up by day-working for local ranchers and penning cattle at area sale barns wouldn't balance my checkbook once the loans started to run backwards on me. And money was my smallest problem.

My mediocre grades didn't bother me. I'll even confess a smug satisfaction knowing, as my teachers often chided me, that my performance seldom equaled my potential. As a country kid who read a good bit, I'd always been smarter than my grades showed. I didn't care. I didn't see myself writing journalism, anyway. But my sorry performance in the arena sure enough troubled me. It troubled me because unlike my lack of try in classes, for rodeo I tried, really tried, to get better. Nothing my coaches or other steer wrestlers and ropers told me seemed to help. I pumped iron, ran, punched a speed bag, and jumped rope. I joined a yoga class. I studied videos and read books by the same infamous Charlie Barnes who later changed my thinking about everything. I even took vitamins and protein shakes, as if a guy my size needed more bulk.

But no matter how many steers I threw in practice nor how many calves I tied down, I couldn't stop the clock a tick faster. Later — after I'd wound my way to Charlie Barnes' practice pen — I understood that it's not the hours you practice that improves a man: it's *who* you practice with because the *who* determines the *how*. Before I met Charlie, I practiced with the local toughs wherever I was. But as Charlie later allowed, "There's a reason they're *local* toughs," meaning they couldn't compete anywhere else, the big-frog-little-pond thing. But before

I hooked up with Charlie, the art of winning had become an even bigger mystery to me than God or women. I needed answers. So, like a heat-seeking missile, my impressionable mind locked on a dot of land I'd pressed into my oil-stained Atlas: the spot outside Checotah where Charlie Barnes, on the rare times he came home, gathered his mail. I meant to get there.

As if student loans and sorry rodeo runs weren't worry enough, I'd met the pure, sweet, loving kind of girl I'll likely not meet again. I won't shame her by naming her. It's enough to say she was a big-hearted, small-waisted, sweet little rich girl who ran barrels on the ammie trail. She ran barrels, that is, when she wasn't busy deceiving herself into thinking I wanted marriage, kids, and an entry-level desk job in her family's feed mill writing mediocre marketing brochures and business letters. She hinted that her family would be willing to buy the local newspaper, too, if I'd show an interest in editing it. Some nights as we lay naked together breathing in time I could almost picture myself coming home to her on a nice little ranch after a day of hack writing. I wondered if the Arena Gods had delivered her to me, or me to her, for the chance at prosperity I'd never had. As Granddaddy used to say, "They aint but three streets to rich, Chance: Womb, Tomb, or Altar."

The womb had delivered me into hard-scrabble north Missouri farm poverty. Likely as not the only things I'd inherit when my folks took to their tombs would be debt and the deception that I could ever work myself free of it. So that closed Doors One and Two, womb and tomb. But Door Number Three, the Altar, lay warm and soft, pretty, and sweet-smelling beside me, waiting, and all I had to do — *all* I had to do — was knock. The big-hearted but misguided girl promised we'd live on one of her family's seven ranches surrounded by white pipe fences with a practice arena near the house. She drove me out to the place, which was prettier than she'd described. A clothing buyer for a major chain, she said I "cleaned up real pretty." She tried to teach me style. She bought me nice Pendleton suits and hauled me to fine meals, symphonies, plays, and social gigs with her folks. Who tolerated me. Who asked about my plans. Who masked their pained scowls when I allowed that I aimed to rodeo until I ran out of road.

"It's an interesting *hobby*," her daddy said. He said it one evening after dinner in a cashy

Tulsa restaurant, “So long as a man keeps it at that.”

He took special offense that I squired his princess in my truck, Flatlander, which he banned from his main driveway. S.S. Flatlander was a ‘94, two-tone Chevy 3500 that I’d christened one bleary night after a rodeo by beheading Pete’s Wicked Ale longnecks on its gravel-pocked chrome grill. Stout as he was ugly, Flatlander delivered ten miles to the gallon with or without my old three-horse Miley in tow. The 350-cubic-inch engine drank two quarts of Havoline 20/50 between gas fills, and the smoky blue trail spewed by those throaty dual tail pipes grew bluer by the mile. But I had *no* payments.

I’d tossed a . . . *borrowed* . . . Motel 6 mattress atop two warped sheets of plywood inside my weathered camper. The camper itself, a kind of non-color formerly known as white, clung like a turtle shell to Flatlander’s bed with the aid of rusty C-clamps and the Grace of the Arena Gods. A four-foot, oil-field pipe wired across a near corner of the ceiling made a place to hang my shirts, jacket, and jeans — when I bothered. To cut costs when I was on the road, I kept lunch meats, cheese, protein shakes, munchies, and soda iced in a battered Igloo cooler crammed next to the case of engine oil under my makeshift bed. My rig usually bore the . . . dare I say *aroma*? . . . of cow shit, horses, and sweat. Sometimes it stank of rank food. My would-be-daddy-out-law stepped into my camper one hot afternoon and stepped right back out.

“Home away from home,” I said.

“If a man’s home is his castle, Chance” he said, “yours is a ruins. I’ll not have my daughter tumbling in such road kill.”

I shrugged and “Yes-sirred” him because I wasn’t raised to sass. The next week my sweet pretty rich girl brought his offer to my tin tepee. Her daddy was willing to buy me a whole new rig (he’d hold the title in his name) to suit my specs if I’d consign Flatlander to the crusher. She refused to relay my answer to him, and I respected her too much to deliver it myself. That aside, I did try to honor her and her family. In a few times of confused romantic weakness I hauled my sweet pretty rich girl the six-hour drive to north Missouri to meet my folks. Who loved her. Who wouldn’t have? She was sweet, kind, beautiful, and rich.

“It’s not a ‘me-or-rodeo’ choice,” she’d promise me, her light blue eyes honest as an evening rainbow. “It’s a ‘me-and-rodeo’ choice. Until we start our family.”

Family, she assured me, was a distant goal. First, she wanted several years of “just us” together. I wanted to believe her. I admit this: as sorry as I was rodeoing, and with student loans looming, I was damn sure tempted to trade my dogging saddle and pigging string for a necktie and a wedding ring. I might have. But I allowed there was a fourth option.

I believed that a poor boy such as myself needed neither Womb, Tomb, nor Altar, so long as he had Ben Franklin’s combination of pluck, luck, and hustle. I believed it because it was, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, all I’d ever been taught. Faith in the human ability to rise by relying solely on our own industry was, as a poli sci prof once lectured our class, “The most singular and distinct American ideal.” To my thinking, the industrious route to rising had one main fork. Safe Fork led through trade school or college to a lifetime of ever richer jobs that yielded savings, investments, property, and active retirements. Risky Fork, my favorite, demanded reckless abandon and a relentless commitment to dreams. It meant committing five to ten years to the dream before staggering in rags — should the dream die — back to Safe Fork to stay there. Whipped. I’d listened to enough elders to know that youth, like fire, consumes itself, so Risky Fork had a shorter life and higher failure rate. But for those who made it, those who scaled whatever chart used to measure their gains, it would be the sweetest route. I wanted me some of that, impossible though it seemed.

Just when I was almost ready to ride Safe Fork toward a life of county fairs and local election stories, I hit a big lick. At Claremore, with the ghost of Will Rodgers perched on the chutes, I waved a steer at the crowd in 4.9 and won just enough to get me to another rodeo, a major one at Ft. Smith, Arkansas. I ought to have known better. I did know better. To the breed of wolves who would be howling at Ft. Smith, my fees would likely be nothing more than added money. I’d be what Charlie later called an “uncredited sponsor” fattening the purse. The Top Fifteen in the world would be there, as would the twenty-five chasing them. So? After Claremore I was bad full of myself. I’d been so starved for any morsel of success that I’d gorged myself on

a peanut. Contrary to Granddaddy's advice, I went to Ft. Smith expecting something to happen. Something did, just not what I expected. What happened there — as my daddy might phrase it — was meant to be, neither good nor bad, I suppose, just meant to be.

Chapter Three

I gassed it to Ft. Smith the Wednesday before Memorial Day, planning to get on the best stick that still had an open seat at that night's performance. I'd drawn up lousy for two-header: my first steer in Wednesday night's perf, my second in Saturday morning's slack at seven in the morning. Slack is the term for cowboy overflow. At big rodeos, only a dozen or so contestants in each event fit the time frame for the performances. Crowds couldn't watch more. But at big rodeos, there may be dozens, or even hundreds, of contestants more than the crowd sees during the perf. Those extra runs and rides are made either early in the day or late, after the night's crowd leaves. For me to draw up as I had was like facing a really bad split in bowling.

And at Ft. Smith, as at lots of big rodeos, each contestant drew two head. The ten fastest times on two head added together would get a third, called "the short-go," which would be televised. If I made it to the short-go, I'd have to camp there until Sunday afternoon's televised perf for my third steer. That would be a great problem to have because I'd have to be winning in the first two rounds for it to happen. But between my first two steers Wednesday and Saturday, unless I had cause to stay in Ft. Smith for all that "dead" time—which I didn't—I'd have to gas it home between runs and gather up some cash from day work, even if it meant hiring myself to my sweet little rich girl's daddy to clip thistles in his endless pastures.

I definitely needed to get on somebody's horse because I'd left my horse, Eli, home with a stone-bruised hoof. I didn't mind leaving him because I knew there'd be better horses there to get on. I really really really wanted on Charlie Barnes' famous blazed-face sorrel gelding, Scooter. In the last five years steer wrestlers had won more money on Scooter than Paris Hilton could blow on a shopping spree. Word was that Charlie had turned down a hundred grand for Scooter, saying he'd gather more mount money than that in the next three years. So I knew, just knew knew knew, that with Charlie hazing, Scooter under me, and any luck at all drawing a decent steer, I could hit a lick. But it didn't take Stephen Hawking to find the flaw in my optimistic equation: Charlie Barnes = Rodeo Legend. Scooter = PRCA Steer Wrestling Horse of the Year (x 3). I, Chance Hendrix = Nobody. Claremore, shmclaremore.

Still, all he could say was, “No” or maybe “Hell no!” and I’d get on somebody else’s horse. I thought he might see the potential for mutual profit. To my thinking, the one thing saving Charlie from driving a county rock truck down that slow, dull road to Social Security was his ability to build winners he could haul and mount for a percentage of every check they won. His horses, great as they were, could only feed him if he kept winners in the saddle. And he found new winners. Or they found him. Now that he’d reached middle age and seldom entered the tougher rodeos, Charlie made a business of finding new talent, lumps of coal like me who just needed his particular flavor of heat and pressure to become Diamonds in the Tough. Charlie built horses. Charlie built steer wrestlers. Charlie built champions. It wasn’t a secret. My Claremore fluke aside, I knew I needed help. So I went looking for Charlie Barnes not only hoping to get a seat, but also hoping, no matter how remotely, that I’d somehow find my way into his practice pen and, eventually, his rodeo rig. Be careful what you wish for, a voice whispered.

Charlie was mounting several of Steer Wrestling’s Young Guns whom he’d seasoned or was still seasoning from wannabes to contenders in his legendary practice pen. The shiniest was Lance Wilkins, the media darling for PRCA Steer Wrestling Rookie of the Year. Rodeo’s hottest new hunk, Lance was just starting to land contracts as a calendar and clothing model. Camera crews shadowed him at major rodeos. There were rumors of film and recording offers, which proved true. TV stations were already inviting him to be a guest commentator on All Things Rodeo.

Under the category of The-Rich-Get-Richer, Lance married part-time WPRA barrel racer and full-time Christian recording star, Shannon Reardon, whose family owned controlling shares in such ventures and properties as, say, Nashville. She was, in the jargon, Number One with a Bullet. Together they formed pro rodeo’s “Cowboy Camelot,” as a reporter for *People* magazine had dubbed their “enchanted lives.” Shannon credited God. Lance credited Charlie Barnes. And they confided in the media that their first born — should God bless them first with a son — would be named Charles Barnes Wilkins. As the rodeo media pumped it, Lance was Charlie’s

Good Son. Spade Spader was Charlie's Prodigal Son, the brooding Jerk-In-Progress who shunned publicity and answered TV announcers' questions with questions of his own that sometimes sounded like rap lyrics:

Pam Minnis: "What's winning a go-round here at a rodeo like Houston mean to you?"

Spade: "Have you ever in the first round K.O.-ed a kangaroo?"

Soon the intimidated TV people black-listed Spade. Print journalists spurned him. Other contestants thought him weird, outrageous, hilarious, and border-line dangerous. The few times I'd seen him on televised rodeos, he bore the hollow-eyed aura of a hit-man. He was wild and sporadic, sometimes winning with a reckless slash at a terrible steer, other times wasting the poodle of the pen with minor-league mistakes that cost him and Charlie major money. Even before I met him, I sensed that he was the enemy of apology and a stranger to regret. And the most savvy of the media --- long before Coldwell came along to capitalize --- sniffed the scent of the myth with which Spade would gift them. Ty Murray, seven-time World Champion All-Around Cowboy, was among those most savvy.

During a televised interview on ESPN2 that I taped, Ty asked Charlie what about Spade's sporadic antics. Charlie fingered his chin and drawled, "Well, Ty, you know better than anybody that the good ones is 'bout always a little on the broncy side." After a wry pause during which the camera mined the mischief in his eyes, he drawled, "Some of 'em is horses."

Ty grinned and nodded, respecting Charlie, as he formed his question.

"Nobody has trained more winners than you, Mister Barnes, cowboys *or* horses. Few guys have strapped leather on more broncs than I have. So my question for our viewers is, 'At what point do you decide that a broncy one is best left to buck?'"

Charlie, his blue eyes droopy and cool as snow clouds, looked at the camera and then at Ty.

"Nobody knows the answer to that one better'n you," he said. The program cut to a commercial for the Built Ford Tough trucks.

After the break, Ty reminded viewers that he was honored to be interviewing "The Senior

Statesman of Steer Wrestling.” Though it’s barely noticeable, I’ve replayed the clip enough to memorize the wince that the word “Senior” carved in Charlie’s face broad red face. It means more now. But for the rest of that interview, Ty asked Charlie safe questions about his horses and his predictions for the upcoming year, then closed with, “The road to the gold begins in Mister Charlie Barnes’ practice pen. We’ll all be watching to see which champion next steps out of the Barnes’ rig.” If they’d answered the question of Spade, they’d done it off camera.

Even though Charlie despised trouble in the truck, the Good Son-Bad Son hype offered free advertisement. Those guys were paying Charlie double dividends: immediate mount money and super advertisement for his clinics, books, and videos. So everybody at any rodeo knew that Lance and Spade owned the first seats on Scooter. Plenty of “name” guys on hot streaks would line up for however many more runs Charlie was willing to let Scooter make. Still, I wanted on that horse. And that started with introducing myself to Charlie Barnes just as I’d rehearsed it: “I’m Chance Hendrix, Mister Barnes. Pleased to meet you, too, sir. Might ya have a seat left on Scooter?” As Coldwell might’ve said, that’s how I scripted it.

I rolled into the rodeo grounds under a scorching mid-afternoon sun looking for Charlie’s rig among rows of shiny diesel trucks and horse trailers with living quarters plusher than any place I’d ever called home. Outside those trailers loafed hundreds of fine shiny horses, mostly tied to trailers, a few loose in portable panels, their heads lowered, legs lazily cocked, eyes droopy, and tails swishing, wise-eyed horses with saddle-marked withers who knew patience between rodeos and road hauls. Guys hauling together loafed in jeans or shorts. At some rigs whole families were gathered. I eased past people who sat reading read in fold-up chairs under customized canvas awnings built onto trailers. Kids roped bales. They watched me rumble past in Flatlander, some offering nods or one-finger waves. Inside other trailers folks were campered-up in their air-conditioned chill watching movies, sleeping, having sex, or whatever folks who own rigs like that do to pass time between drives and perfs. Because. They. Can.

Eventually I found Charlie’s rig on the backside of the dusty parking grounds, off by itself. On his four-horse Featherlite, in black two-foot lettering that loped the length of its

twenty-four-foot aluminum side, were painted the words, “Charlie Barnes,” followed by the two years he’d qualified for the National Finals –’87 and ‘94 — and lesser titles he’d won. In smaller lettering was written, “Horses For Sale. Horses Trained. Steer Wrestling Clinics. Books. Videos,” along with a phone number and a web site.

But something wasn’t right about the deal. The crewcab silver Dodge dualie under his trailer sported a big “Cowgirl Up!” decal on its tinted rear glass. A chained Blue Heeler lay panting under the truck. And the wrong horses were hitched to the trailer. I felt as if I’d been hurled back in time. Beggar and Chooser, the matched bay dogging team Charlie had campaigned for a decade before cracking out on Scooter and Spike, stood lazily shifting their weight, fly bonnets shielding their faces. I’d grown up following their careers in magazine articles, *PRCA Sports News* cut lines, and TV. But who was the “Cowgirl Up”? Whose dog? Where were Scooter and Spike? If anybody was around to explain, he or she had to be inside Charlie’s trailer. I nosed Flatlander toward the tall chain-link fence a polite distance away and parked where shade from the tall hackberry trees along the street beyond the fence would stretch as evening came. I meant to come back and steal a nap after I’d paid my fees, checked the draw, and settled what I’d ride that night. A nap makes a late drive home a tad safer. But naps come more restful if a man doesn’t have to swat flies and mop sweat.

That spring I’d modernized my camper to at least 1970s standards, only thirty years behind. With a borrowed jigsaw, a shoeing hammer, a bent square, and a pint of Black Jack Daniels, I’d jerrybuilt an air-conditioner bracket in the hind wall to the left of the door. The problem was that, unlike the new rigs that hauled their own water reservoirs and electric generators, my air-conditioning relied on being parked no more than an extension cord’s length from a 110-volt plug. At Ft. Smith, all plug-ins were occupied. A hot southerly breeze and shade, when it inched its way over the burnt Bermuda grass to Flatlander, would be all the luxury I got. But I’d made it. And just being there, I told myself, with the promise of a winner’s check only one great run way, was plenty good enough. Granddaddy used to say that rodeo, like good deeds, is its own reward.

But that was a lie. Like anybody who wants something too much, I'd shrunk my already little life to a single-hinged moment: the moment I'd ask Charlie Barnes did he have a seat left on Scooter. I was confident I could impress him if he'd let me on. Granddaddy's words came back to me: "Them that expect nothing is seldom disappointed." Why hadn't I asked his meaning?

I stepped out of Flatlander, walked around back, and climbed in my camper to rehearse my introduction mentally over a cold turkey sandwich. *I'm Chance Hendrix, Mister Barnes. Pleased to meet you, too, sir. Might ya have a seat left on Scooter?* In the distance came a feminine voice, testy and loud, closing on me. I eased my curtain aside, and watched her strut, a tough, tanned, bare-legged dudess in a baggy Shania Twain tee shirt, way short frayed cutoffs, and ropers with spur rowels tinkling in time, finger-jabbing the air as she ripped into somebody — her squeeze, I allowed — courtesy of wireless wizardry. A single black braid whipped side to side on her neck like a pendulum, the braid anchored beneath a pink visor cap. She was on course to storm right past Flatlander, which surely meant she was heading to Charlie's rig since it was the only one beyond mine. I flopped on my mattress and faked sleep as she barreled past my open camper door, dust puffs rising from her ropers, her voice as deadpan sarcastic as Jon Stewart's.

"Of course I was sincere when I said I *missed* you, Limp Dick. What matters now is that I'm a better shot."

She ordered Limp Dick to vacate whatever dot on the planet he was soiling with his presence by the time she got there, wherever *there* was. At the silver "Cowgirl Up!" dualie, thirty feet from me, she turned and fired an over-the-shoulder glance as if she'd just realized someone might've been in my rig. She spoke sharply to the ill-broke Heeler dog for clawing her bare leg, then scaled the truck bed in one doe-like leap and whipped the electric generator to life with a single fierce rip of the starter rope. Backing from the truck bed, one lean bare leg at a time vaulting the tailgate before sliding boot to bumper to ground, she flashed such sweet little crescents of girl flesh and white panties that for an instant I was deceived into thinking she, like

Sears, might could have a softer side.

Who could she be? Or, more practically, *whose* could she be? I tried to grip the romantic complexities of that rig to prevent my bad self from accidentally triggering emotional land mines that'd blow my future all the way under the editor's desk of a small-town news rag owned by my almost in-laws. Limp Dick couldn't be anybody in Charlie's rig. No need to dial those you can cuss in person. That eliminated Spade. Or maybe not. Maybe he'd replaced Limp Dick.

Married Lance surely wouldn't keep a chippie. Her boldness said she wasn't just a stall swamper working for day wages. And she was way too cowgirl to be anybody's buckle bunny. If she were Charlie's daughter — which she looked enough like him to be — she'd sure enough been kept secret. Whoever she was, she skipped up the three metal steps into Charlie's trailer, her dog trailing, and drew the door closed hard enough to crack sheet rock. She seemed alone, a temporary condition it seemed my moral obligation to cure. I bathed with a wet handkerchief dipped in a Love's bag of melting ice, then sashayed over, sucked my lungs full of that drenched Arkansas air, and rapped on the trailer door. Boot steps, muffled by carpeting, thudded on the floor. The door arced past my face.

“Yeah?” she said.

Up close, her features looked even more like Charlie's did in all the pics. Her high, broad cheeks and curved nose, like his, hinted of the Barnes Cherokee blood. A cute gap I hadn't noticed divided her big white front teeth. Her eyes clamped mine like a pair of big emerald magnets and wouldn't release. I tried to seem cool, relaxed. But when I raised my hand to the door frame, the Heeler growled and bristled, its spiky teeth aimed my gonads.

“Topsy,” she scolded. She conked the dog's skull with her knuckles. Topsy, her marbly gray eyes glaring, dropped to her belly against the girl's worn brown ropers. A blue truck pulling a silver trailer snarled past, dusting us, sunlight glinting off all its chrome. Diesel fumes lingered as the engine's droned on. I moved slightly to the right and peered past her into the living quarters. A black couch beneath an enlarged rodeo picture of Charlie bulldogging at the '94 NFR spanned the far wall.

“Lose something?” she said. I nodded toward Flatlander.

“That’s me over there,” I said.

“I can see the resemblance,” she said.

“I’m entered in the steer wrestlin’,” I said, letting her little snipe slide.

“Tonight’s perf.”

“No seats left,” she said. Her phone chirped in her blouse pocket. She yanked the door closed as if I’d vanished. I sat down on the top step, straining vainly to hear. A few minutes later the door opened. Her voice came raspy and dry as a husk.

“You camp here any longer, I’ll expect first and last month’s rent.”

“Mister Barnes — ”

“In his other rig,” she said. She swept a hand across an imaginary map in the air. “Seven or eight rigs past the showers.”

“And you might be?”

“Tired of men’s bullshit.”

“Fairly common female condition,” I said, “not fatal.” I tried again. “So you are —?”

“Way above you,” she said.

Tipsy’s curled lip quivered above her ice-pick teeth. Shooting me a bemused smile, the dudess drew the door slowly to her and closed it with the lightest yet most damning little click. Simple as that, without even learning her name, I fell in lust with Lucy Barnes.

Chapter Four

Since I'd be going past the rodeo office en route to Charlie's other rig, I meant to pay my fees and see if they'd posted the night's draw. At Ft. Smith the office is indoors, tucked behind the rough stock chutes at the far end of the arena. The arena is a giant enclosure of rising rows of airy green metal bleachers that'll seat 10,000 fans under roof.

"Careful not to drop that check." I joked with the blue-haired lady clerk at the office window, forcing a nervous laugh at the irony that it really would bounce. Her dark-rimmed glasses dangling from a chain, the blue-haired lady handed me my number. Then she raised my check with a bony, high-veined hand and slid her glasses onto her powdered nose with the other. She squinted at my address.

"Everything current?" she said, her voice deep as a man's.

"I'm a month behind on the rent," I said, "two months on my calling plan. And the girlfriend's a week late with her monthly. That qualify me for lower fees?"

"We know where to find you," she said.

Behind the office a good many guys stood huddled in the grandstand's shade around the night's draw, sheets of paper tacked to a series of planks, one each for bareback broncs, bulls, calves, saddle broncs, and steers, both roping and dogging. Guys from all events and every state were there, dressed in everything from sandals and shorts to ten-gallon Stetsons, some high-fiving, some cussing, others offering and getting advice about a calf or bull or bronc they'd drawn. I shouldered my way to the steer wrestling sheet and ran my finger down the printed list, stopping it on steer #27 and Hendrix, Chance. I turned to other guys scanning the list.

"Anybody know 'im?"

"Bad to set up," said a burly guy with a droopy red mustache and a missing upper molar. He turned his index fingers into horns and arched them toward his eyes as if to blind himself.

"Bad to fake, too," said a Viking-faced guy with a Mennuh-sooooo-da accent. I remembered the guy from somewhere. "At Tuscon he dropped to his knees when the gates opened and let the dogger take ten with him."

“How’s he shape?” I said, meaning how did he play once he was caught.

“Who knows?” Missing Molar said. “Never seen him caught.”

“Guess I best cowboy up,” I said.

“Be lucky not to get a horn up your arse,” Mennuh-sooooo-da said.

“Caint be that bad,” I said.

“Worse,” Double-M said. “Saw a godawful wreck over in Lafayette, Louisiana this spring. Ol’ #27 hurled himself at the hazin’ horse’s breast collar. Nobody killed, thank the Arena Gods.”

He did a mock crossing of himself and winked at his buddy.

“In Clyde Burk’s name, Amen,” Mennuh-sooooo-da said.

PRCA Hall-of-Fame cowboy Clyde Burk had been killed in a horse-steer wreck while hazing at Denver in the 1945 Stock Show and Rodeo. Every wannabe hazer and dogger grew up hearing the story. I wanted to puke. If the steer was sorry as they allowed he was, it wouldn’t matter whether I rode Scooter or the mechanical pony outside the local K-Mart. They’d ought to have called it the “unluck of the draw.” Still, I’d come to meet Charlie Barnes, and meet him I by damn would. I walked out the tall chain link gates under the arena and sauntered through the rigs toward where Charlie was supposed to be, looking for familiar faces or other horses that might serve as backups.

I’d begun to hear the shoeing hammer’s high, clear, belling against the anvil long before I rounded a bend and saw Charlie’s rig, that long red Chevy 3500 club-cab, powered by a Duramax diesel. Two guys were shoeing a horse that looked to be Scooter on the grass behind the dollied-down Travalong trailer. Lance Wilkins, the fair child of Charlie’s rig, stood quiet and well-groomed at Scooter’s head, holding the lead shank still as a hitch rail. As relaxed in person as in his photos, Lance seemed never to strain the crease from his starched shirts and jeans. It was hard to imagine the guy had ever spit, shit, or sweat. But wild man Spade worked at the forge, bare-headed, shirtless, muscled as a skinned bull’s forequarters, every move sudden and violent as a firing pin. I wondered if he and Lucy were paired-up.

Neither Spade nor Lance acknowledged me. I eased under the trailer's awning to wait in the shade. As Spade worked, the wild ringlets of black hair matted to his head and chest spewed sweat the way downspouts shed rain from a barn gutter. His dark glasses were dusty and sweat-streaked. The seat and legs of the Wranglers visible around his leather shoeing apron clung dark with dirt and sweat. Even the barrels of his boots had soaked through from the drenched jeans tucked inside them.

He stood at the roaring propane forge as if the blaze came from his belly, his left hand rotating the handles of the long steel tongs that gripped the reddening shoe in the blue flame. When the shoe glowed molten hot, he pulled it from the roaring forge, braced it on the anvil's tip, then hammered it to match his memory of Scooter's hoof as he'd trimmed and rasped it into shape. Spade raised the cooling shoe several times, inspecting it the way a jeweler eyes a ruby, then laid shoe to anvil and tapped it to perfection as the red steel faded once again to silver. When the shoe satisfied him, Spade lowered it with the tongs into a black plastic bucket filled with sudsy gray water. It hissed steam as he plunged the shoe to the bottom to cool before he nailed it on Scooter. Whatever questions Charlie held about Spade's bulldogging, it was clear he trusted Spade completely with Scooter's high-dollar hooves.

Satisfied with the shoe's fit, Spade ratcheted up his chin and glared at me as if I'd slapped his mother — whore though he claimed her to be. He peeled off his sweat-streaked shades, cleaned them with a paper towel he'd torn from a roll on the tailgate, and studied me with an expression I took to be arrogant indifference. It was as if he not only didn't know who I was, he didn't care. Though I'd need time to learn it, Spade was self-contained as a barn owl. With one lone exception --- the Achilles Tendon Coldwell later discovered and meant to sever --- Spade let the world come to him, and it always did. In time I came to understand his wary way, but nobody could word it better than Coldwell. In his excitable, overblown, arm-pumping chatter Coldwell tried to explain why Spade and I came to hold such warring views of Charlie.

“You began with the myth and learned the man,” Coldwell told me. “Spade began with man and learned the myth.” Always the performer, that's how Coldwell talked all the time, not

just about Spade. But an unmistakable reverence rose in his tone when he spoke of Spade because no matter how greatly he came to fear and envy Spade, to him Spade always represented purity, “the thing itself,” Coldwell said. I don’t know why I never asked him what the thing was that was itself in Spade.

“Just missed Mister Barnes,” Spade said. He said it in a way that told me the dudes in Charlie’s rig had phoned ahead. He mopped sweat from his forehead with a bulging bare arm, sizing me. If rodeo hadn’t found him, he would’ve made a fine boxer. Or assassin. The lens of his paranoia caused him to view every man as a threat. He was testing me, marking turf. He didn’t scare me. I’d sized him, too, and allowed that he was four inches and fifty pounds short of being man enough. I smirked. He answered with a dark slight smile no one could’ve mistaken for happy.

“Bad day,” he said. “Mister Barnes aint right with his bowels.”

I laughed. Spade reset his shades and glared, his matted chest heaving.

“Truth,” Lance said, calm as the hot still air. “Hemorrhoids flared. Mister Barnes rates his day by the quality of his morning constitutional.”

“Went to his other trailer after more ass ointment,” Spade said. “Could’ve saved yourself the walk.”

He retrieved the shoe, placed a few shoeing nails carpenter-style in his teeth, and bent under Scooter’s flank, lifting and locking Scooter’s left fetlock in the knee vice his legs formed under the leather shoeing apron. Scooter let go a long groan and balanced on his other hind leg. I moved closer, into the sun.

“You’re Spade Spader,” I said. If he’d accept, I meant to shake hands.

“Unless I knocked up your sister,” he mumbled through the nails. He had a sure enough Texican accent, the kind that pronounces July “Jew-lie” or idea as “Aye!-de-a-uh,” hammering the long, slow first syllable. “If that’s the deal, my name’s Lance Wilkins.” He steadied the shoe, lined a nail, and tapped it through Scooter’s hoof until the tip pierced the hoof’s upper wall.

“He’s always dreaming he’s me,” Lance drawled. “Take more than a name change.”

Reserved in dress and demeanor, Lance was easy to misjudge. Folks were surprised to learn that he was a good bit taller and heavier than Spade, almost my size.

“Heard you met Miss Lucy,” Lance said. Spade’s lips bent into a grin around the nails in his teeth. He wiggled the nail he’d just set to be sure it hadn’t penetrated the quick. I sensed traps that I thought myself too cool to trigger.

“Not ‘xactly by name,” I said.

“What’d Miss Lucy allow?” Spade muttered through the nails.

“No seats left on Scooter here. She right?”

Spade nodded yes, dripping sweat as he tested another nail’s angle before tapping it through the hoof wall. The air smelled of propane, sweaty horses, and hot iron. The forge whooshed blue flame. When Scooter groaned and leaned his weight onto Spade, he caught a sharp whack in his belly with the hammer for it.

“Stand up, hotdamn it!” Spade said.

“Everybody wants on him,” Lance said, nodding toward Scooter. “That’s why Charlie sent Miss Lucy after the old guys. You saw them.”

“What about them?” I said. “Beggar full, too?”

Spade let go of Scooter’s hoof then straightened and stretched, his muscles drawing like bow strings against themselves. His dark eyes burned like the blue propane flame. He stepped toward me, shaking his head sideways, pumping the hammer in his hand.

“Horse don’t have to be full for a man to deny rides,” he said. “Mister Barnes don’t want somebody on his horses, somebody don’t get on. The number he’s mounted means jack shit.”

He spun and brought the hammer down on the anvil. Scooter flinched. The ringing lingered in the heat waves like dust. Spade glared. His muscles twitched. In my ignorance of their rig’s politics I’d asked something wrong, like asking the bully’s girl to dance because she’s been standing by the punch bowl alone too long. But it wasn’t, I would learn, at all about a girl.

“Aint that right, Lance?” Spade asked, hitting every syllable hard.

“All up to Mister Barnes,” Lance said. “Not the best day to ask.” But he said it calmly,

with none of Spade's heat, which reminded me of the calm I'd be sacrificing if I rang the anvil with Spade's skull.

"I got it," I said. "It's all up to Mister Barnes. His rig. His horses. His say-so."

"You got it," Spade said. He'd lightened a little and bent back under Scooter. I turned to go.

"Almost all," Spade said. "Almost all up to Mister Barnes." Still bent and gripping Scooter's hoof, he'd spit the nails into his cupped hand as he'd straightened to face me.

"Regardless the horses, Lucy aint part of the deal. Mister Barnes is her uncle. That makes her like a . . . sister to us. Aint that right, Lance?" Something inside me shifted when I heard she wasn't paired-up.

"Baby sister," Lance said.

"Virgin baby sister," Spade said.

Recalling Lucy's insult about Flatlander, I said, "I see the resemblance."

They surprised me by laughing.

"You got it," Spade said. "You got it."

"Know what I don't got?" I asked him. I let him wait. "A sister."

"Too bad," he said. He smiled that wicked smile and went to nailing on plates. I walked away thinking about my sweet little rich girl whom I won't shame by naming. I thought of her family. I thought of my folks. I thought of Charlie, Spade, and Lance. Most of all, I was thinking of Lucy. You couldn't call me naive, but it'd be fair to say I lacked the perspective to recognize a ship wreck from any distance. I was just a star-struck bumpkin clutching a first-class ticket on the Titanic and all I could say was, "I caint wait to see me an iceberg."

I had to find Charlie. Sore-assed or not, he was still Charlie Barnes.

Chapter Five

Feeling about as welcome as Judas Iscariot at the Vatican, again I rapped at Lucy's door. Again she opened it. Again Topsy the Blue Heeler growled from between Lucy's bare brown legs. But Lucy was barefoot now. Her ankles and feet shone so comically white below her boot-top tan line that I would've laughed if I hadn't raised my eyes to the wet, puffed cheeks of a girl who'd been sleeping or --- I saw it then --- crying. She sniffled. Her unbraided black hair hung free and thick as Spanish moss.

"They told me Mister Barnes came up here," I said. I rested my boot on the bottom step and kept my eyes lowered. Crying women dissolve me like rain on loose stock salt. She sniffled again. A tear plopped onto the glossy pink nail of her bare little toe.

"Allergies," she said. She gathered herself, breathed in, and let go a long sigh.

I told myself that her allergy was to Limp Dick.

"He was here," she said. "Some guys snagged him away to go try a horse."

That's about right, I thought. Bad bowels. Grieving niece. Quarrelsome body guards. In a rare piece of good judgment, I convinced myself to delay meeting Charlie until another rodeo. I'd find somebody else's horse to get on.

"I thank you for what you've done," I said. "I'll catch ya'll down the road."

Lucy swooned against the door frame and settled into herself like a wilting rose. Suddenly I wanted to pull her against me and breathe in her long, loose hair. I wanted to lie to her that everything — no matter the poison pollen that triggered her allergy — would be fine.

"When I was rude before . . . it wasn't about you," she said.

"Your allergy?" I said. I wondered what sudden idiocy caused me to crack the latch on that dangerous gate. She smiled.

"Uncle Charlie said for you to wait here."

"You told him about me?"

"He'll talk to you, is all." She sniffled again. Cold air spilled from the open door into the heat. "No promises."

I thanked her, though it seemed too little. I mumbled that I'd be in Flatlander, napping. I told her about my long drive home after the perf. I told her I had to pen cattle back at the Tahlequah sale barn tomorrow. I yawned and stretched and allowed I sure enough needed a nap.

"I was planning the same," she said. She fingered her hair as if offering evidence that she'd meant to sleep. "It's cooler in here," she said.

"I don't mind heat," I said. "Besides, wouldn't look right."

"It's Uncle Charlie's rig," she said. "You have business with him. It'll be fine, so long as you're patient."

She touched my shoulder light as a tip-wise waitress might, and kept hold. I too much liked what I felt.

"Listen," I said, "I'd best go."

"Shameful to waste all this cool on one person," she said. "You're welcome to share."

"I didn't get that sense from your brothers."

She frowned while she puzzled out who I meant.

"Those buffoons? What'd they say to you?"

"That they tend to their" — I almost said virgin — "baby sis."

"Like they would a show mare," she said. "They'd bit and hobble me if they thought I'd stand. You afraid?"

"I am," I said. "But not of them."

"Of what?"

I could've said prostate cancer, steady work, or marriage. Or, though I couldn't say why, *her*.

"All I'm asking is for a mount," I said.

"Right," she said. She took my hand from the door frame. Scolding Topsy, she tugged me up the stairs and closed the door. Her dark green eyes fed on me. "That's all you want? One night's mount? And you'll drive away satisfied?"

She led me to the long couch under the picture of Charlie dogging, lifted her hands to my

shoulders, and pressed me to the cushions. On the wall opposite the couch hung calendars, rodeo action shots, and posters featuring Lance. There was one shot of Spade getting down on a high-horned steer while Charlie hazed. And there was a shot of some kid who looked to be still in high school hanging in the right stirrup of a sliding calf horse and waving slack at a neck-roped calf that didn't yet know it was caught. I thought it odd there were no pictures of Lucy.

"You camp here," she said, looking satisfied as a girl arranging dolls. "I'll be up there."

She shinnied atop the king bed built into the trailer's gooseneck nose and sat cross-legged, leaning back on her hands, her head tilted forward under the low tile ceiling, her long hair touching the sheets. Tippy stretched on the brown carpet beside the vertical steps to the bed, her glassy eyes set on me.

"Saw you go once," Lucy said. "You were on some dink buckskin that squirmed —"

"His name's Eli," I said. "I own him."

"Sor-ry," she said.

"You didn't know."

"No, no," she said, giggling. "I'm not sorry I called him a dink. I'm sorry you own him. At least you had the sense to leave him home."

"Stone bruised hoof," I said, miffed. "Otherwise he'd be here."

"Not to hurt your feelings," she said, "but you're plumb afoot on that dink. Charlie's always got a few dead solid horses for sale at his place. All prices, from outrageous to insane. But he takes payments. Why not come try one?"

Unless I was bad wrong, Lucy was flirting. And why not? At the risk of sounding immodest, women other than Momma have convinced me that I am a strapping and handsome lad. I can bench press a Volkswagen. I have the warm brown eyes of an honest horse. I have strong white teeth I flossed (once) and thick curly hair, palomino golden. My smile curves bright as a teacup moon from dimple to dimple. I listen like a tape recorder. I have the voice of a DJ. To phrase this politely, I seldom sit out a dance when my foot twitches for action. So there my bad self was, alone with this heartbroken little lovely on the rebound. I knew to walk away, but

somebody had nailed my boots to the floor.

“You’d haze for me?” I said, flirting. The hazer gallops beside the steer on the opposite side of the dogger to keep the steer running straight. “If I come?”

“You’d trust me?” she said. “I might rein off at the last second just to watch you bounce like a lost hubcap.”

“You’d do that?”

“Never know,” she said. “It’s happened. To other guys.”

“The one on the phone?” I said, knowing I ought not have.

“You were eavesdropping,” she said. She cocked a finger at me. “I felt it.”

“Wasn’t like I had to wiretap.”

“Let’s talk horses,” she said. “How are you at starting colts?”

I told her I’d started a good many back home — she asked where home was — and lots more later in college while penning cattle at feedyards and sale barns.

“I’ll bet you have that light touch,” she said, “on their tender young mouths.”

She slid out her tongue and pressed a finger to it like a bit, baiting me.

“What time’s Mister Barnes due back?” I said.

“Relax. We’re talking horses.”

“And I need to find one.”

“Patience,” she said. “Uncle Charlie prizes patience. Know what else?”

“Probably not.”

“That night I saw you on your dink buckskin, I vowed to meet you. This is so pathetic, but I’ve always wanted to tell you that, Chance Hendrix. I went to the dance — I don’t even like to dance — hoping you’d ask me. But when I saw you there . . . with . . . where is *she* now?”

I checked my watch.

“Most likely drivin’ home from her office in Oklahoma City. She’s a buyer for a western clothing chain.”

“What time will she call? Is she dialing right now?”

I laughed.

“Did I say something funny?”

“I’ve got a journalism degree,” I said. “I’m supposed to ask the penetrating questions.”

Lucy slid to her belly and rested her chin on her crossed arms. Her long loose black hair feathered across her face like a curtain. Her girly shampoo and soap scents hung close to my nose. With her Mona Lisa gaze, she studied me.

“Then do it,” she said. “Ask.”

So I did, starting with Limp Dick. She reduced him to a fling, “possibly resulting from a latent Electra Complex,” she said. He’d been her prof in the grad program while she was working toward her Master’s in Sports Psychology. “An infatuation,” she said. She allowed that she’d been in love with the idea of him, not the man himself. Twice her age, he was widely published, respected, recently divorced, and, usually impotent.

“So in the end it wasn’t all that hard for you,” I said. She groaned.

“That matters less to women than guys like to believe,” she said. “I quit him because he had a hole in him. He was counterfeit as a three-dollar bill. This brilliant prof who’d written books on mental toughness couldn’t sleep without a night light and three stiff shots.”

“At least something was stiff.”

“Let it go,” she said. “You’re being juvenile.”

“Maybe it matters more to us guys than you ladies like to believe.”

“Have you published?” she said. “You’re a writer, right?”

“Right. But a damn sure sorry writer,” I said, “a sterling C- minus average.”

“You disappoint me.”

“A fairly common comment,” I said. I’d long learned that women and bosses appreciate masculine self-deprecation. But then I mentioned a few articles I’d pedaled to horse magazines for beer money and a minor byline.

“Can I find copies?” she said, more interested than I’d expected.

I told her that if any copies remained, they were likely archived as couch legs or outhouse

toilet paper.

“You’re a defeatist,” she said. “Uncle Charlie won’t mount you with that attitude.”

“Not a defeatist about rodeo,” I said.

“Only with what you wish not to do?”

“You should be a shrink,” I said.

“I’ve been applying to doctoral programs,” she said.

“You’re going to be the shrink I ought not trust?”

“Sports Psychologist.”

“A shrink for jocks?”

“Who has greater need? As Uncle Charlie says,” — she dropped into his deep drawl —
“Winnin’s mental. Winners ain’t.”

“That’s why I’m here,” I said.

“In Uncle Charlie’s trailer?”

I nodded yes.

“So,” she said, “what is it Chance Hendrix really wants?”

“To know your name, too, so I can speak of you in third person like you’re doing me.”

“Lucinda Rose Barnes,” she said. My father, Judge, is Uncle Charlie’s older and only brother. Other than genes, all they share is a common hatred of one another. I answer to Lucy.”

“What does Lucinda Rose Barnes want?” I said.

“To know what Chance— what’s your middle name? — Hendrix wants.”

“Jacob,” I said. “And I want us to stop discussing ourselves in third person.”

“Done.”

“Okay, I want what everybody here wants. To win the world. Or at least make the NFR. But first become the next Rookie of the Year, like Lance means to do. Then win the world. Who’d settle for less?”

“World titles are over-rated,” she said. “Uncle Charlie doesn’t have one.”

“He’s trained those who did.”

“And who didn’t,” she said. “Way more of them.”

“And you call me defeatist?”

“Journalists have regular incomes with health and retirement benefits,” she said. “I’m realistic about the odds of winning the world, no matter who you train and haul with.”

“But you’re rodeoing.”

“I am, but I’ve other passions. Do I intimidate you?”

“I’m keeping you awake,” I said. I stood to go.

“Will you tell her about me?” Lucy said. “When you speak with her tonight?”

“Aint decided.”

“Then will you tell me about her?”

“What purpose would that serve?”

“Reciprocity. I told you all about Limp Dick.”

“But he’s over,” I said, “just another slice of your past.”

Lucy smiled that beguiling smile as if to say, “And the difference would be --- ?” The glint in her eyes made me recall the snide comment she’d made about becoming a better shot. I pictured her pretty dark green eyes, one closed, the other peering through cross hairs. I told myself that this girl, make no mistake, could squeeze a trigger and feel nothing but recoil.

“Go make a run,” she said, which was the rodeo equivalent of “break a leg.” Then she turned her back to me and settled her head into a pillow, her long loose hair draping her shoulders like a black shawl. Tippy, vigilant as a smoke alarm, slowly wagged her tail. I stepped out and eased the door shut behind me.

Chapter Six

New information ought to come with a delete option. I mean, what was I supposed to do now knowing that Lucy had waited for me at the rodeo dance? Bzzzzz. Gone. That's what I wished I could do.

Outside, the heat had me feeling lazy as a full snake. The sun's angle put the time at half past five, a couple hours before the perf. On the street that paralleled the fence line beyond Flatlander, cars were already jockeying for parking spots. People of all descriptions in their once-a-year western duds, singles, couples, families, saddle clubs, and scout troops moved toward the ticket booths far down the narrow blacktop. Spotty shade now stretched from the tall trees to Flatlander, but I couldn't have slept despite my exhaustion, or maybe because of it. Instead, lost in a dreamy sense of wonder, I drifted to where Charlie's horses stood hitched to his trailer.

Maybe because I was so punchy, so beat from lack of sleep, reality slipped a cog. For a time outside of time it was like I stood outside myself watching myself as in a video or a dream. School was over for good. A sweet little rich girl wanted to marry me. Lucy Barnes wanted to dance. And I was standing beside Charlie Barnes' rig with legendary horses. It was all a dreamy mystery, the Mystery of Me. But it was about to explain itself. In one of those rare moments of clarity that too often fade when sobriety returns, I understood that those horses hitched to that trailer had carried me there, to that precise moment in that exact spot. Stories about horses. Stories of cowboys whose lives were interesting only because of horses. Remove either, and the stories died. But I understood something greater, too, regarding the Mystery of Me. I understood that the stories also belonged to those who heard or read them and took the stories in their blood and bone.

That led me rethink my daddy's feelings about Granddaddy Hendrix. If blame for what I had or hadn't become ought to be assigned, then it ought to be assigned to Granddaddy. Before I learned to read, I craved the stories he told me during his rare visits. Later he taught me what magazines to read and left me old copies of them and *PRCA Sports News*. He'd mailed me articles clipped from town newspapers and postmarked Manawa, Wisconsin; Red Bluff,

California; Kissimmee, Florida; and dozens of other rodeo towns exotic as sin to a hick kid. I memorized the stories. I longed to live on the road among cowboys and horses as Granddaddy did. My folks, especially Daddy, battled to prevent it. When he saw it was futile, he compromised. He grudgingly helped me buy horses and practice cattle. He hauled me to Little Britches and later high school rodeos on the condition that I keep good grades and graduate from college. So it was to appease my folks and school counselors that I'd found myself in Oklahoma, majoring in agri-journalism. One of my journalism profs argued, mistakenly I now believe, that I couldn't serve two masters, rodeo and writing. The choice wasn't one.

There I stood, sweaty and sleepy, beside two of the famous horses who'd made me think I wanted to write. Magazines had featured these horses in stories I'd once imagined myself writing. Beggar and Chooser were matched bay geldings, identical full brothers born one year apart. Their pedigrees were pure rodeo royalty: King P-34 on the top side and Oklahoma Star on the bottom. Charlie'd bought them as yearlings from their breeder in California and built them his way, Beggar, the oldest, on the dogging side, Chooser on the hazing side. They had to be crowding twenty now, but were still shiny and shapey as a new silver bit. Charlie hadn't sold them because he'd priced them not to sell, which was, according to all versions of the story, out of character. He was the only one who could tell them apart, so the story went, which had led to a dangerous though comical set-up.

In the '90s Beggar had twice been voted Steer Wrestling Horse of the Year. Chooser had been among the solidest hazing horses in the world. But Chooser turned union. He knew his job. He loved his job. He was pure hazing horse, so pure that he'd flat buck off anybody who tried to ride him into the dogging box. He'd earned his reputation the summer of '92 when Charlie — then third in the world standings — blew a knee and stayed home to mend. Some toughs who'd been hauling with him kept his rig on the road. Charlie had sent the horses in halters with their names engraved on brass plates riveted to each cheek piece. For reasons never quite explained, the halters were lost or switched. Somebody, whether by prank or accident, cinched the dogging saddle on Chooser in the first perf at Ogalalla, Nebraska.

Everybody agreed that Chooser tried to tell his rider nicely that he didn't belong in the dogging box. But when the guy stabbed a spur in his belly, Chooser spit out the bit and mailed the guy into that Nebraska sky. A rodeo photog snapped a great picture of Chooser bucking so hard the stirrups slapped together above the cantle as the would-be dogger rolled spur over Stetson high above the saddle. For years afterward, guys were a little leery reining Beggar toward the box for fear they were on the wrong horse. True or not, it made great copy.

I spoke to the horses, wedged myself between them, stroked their heads, and searched for some shred of difference. Their size matched perfectly. Each stood a strong fifteen hands, each weighed maybe twelve-fifty. Their muzzles, manes, tails and fetlocks varied not one hair. They wore the same size one shoe. But when I lifted their fly bonnets, I spotted the tiny blue globe in one horse's left eye, maybe an old injury, maybe an oddity from birth. I stroked his face and talked to him while I examined his eye.

"Born with it," a deep voice drawled. Charlie's.

I'd wheeled to face him, startled he could've gotten so close without my knowing. His brown eyes were wide-set as Lucy's, dark as cowboy coffee, his broad, bent, gray-stubbled face a deeper bronze. His front teeth showed the same gap. Anybody could've mistaken them for father and daughter. I stuttered an apology and blurted that I'd always wanted to see his horses for myself. Awkwardly I introduced myself and shook hands, not at all like I'd scripted.

"Hendrix?" he said. "You talked to Miss Lucy."

"She's nappin'," I said. "She said wait."

He measured the effect she'd had on me as it leaked through my words, then smiled.

"Knew a Lash Hendrix when I first cracked out with my permit," he said. "Saw him off and on for years. Old timer who told damn funny stories."

"Granddaddy," I said. "Fifteen years dead."

Charlie mumbled quick condolences then asked what I'd drawn. I told him what I'd heard about the steer, how guys said I'd be as well off paying the turn-out fine. Charlie pulled his Cope from his plaid denim shirt pocket, packed a fresh wad in his lip, and held out the can.

When I shook my head no, he pocketed the can, tipped back his lid, and finger-combed his salt-and-pepper hair before resetting the sweat-ringed Stetson. He draped an arm over the globe-eyed horse's neck and patted its shoulder. His Okie drawl, unlike mine, ran generations deep.

"No luck turnin' out. Aint that right, Chooser old man?"

"My horse is stone-bruised," I said. "I need a seat, Mister Barnes."

"Where all ya been?" Charlie asked. It was a coyote way of asking how likely I'd be to generate mount money for him.

"Won Claremore," I said. "Waved one in 4.9."

"Scooter's got too many," he said. "He's tired. Everybody wants on him. Gotta save him as much as I can for the guys I'm haulin'. You met 'em."

"I did."

He stepped past me and stroked Beggar's black nose. Beggar nibbled at his hand as if he expected the apple treat Charlie pulled from his pocket. "Could find you a seat on the old man here. Lost a step, but he'll keep you in the Go-Hole."

"You'll haze for me, Mister Barnes?"

The hazer is so crucial that at lots of tough rodeos only a handful of guys earn enough doggers' trust to be asked to haze. Charlie likely got asked more than anybody, regardless the mood of his hemorrhoids.

"Unless you arranged otherwise. Lucy's a hand, you know."

"I'd as soon you did," I said.

He grinned in way that kept me wondering how everybody knew so much about Lucy's life. We turned to face the truck rumbling toward us, slowing. It was Charlie's red crewcab Chevy, Lance driving, Spade against the passenger door. Oddly, I thought, the speakers blared Fifty Cents' *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. Charlie gestured to the spot where he wanted his truck parked. Nobody seemed surprised I was there. Lance parked, lowered the tailgate, and unloaded the anvil, forge, and work table while Spade, still bare-headed and shirtless, hitched on his leather shoeing apron.

“Mind bringing me one?” Spade called to me. I looked to Charlie.

“Start with Beggar,” Charlie said.

“Or Chooser,” Spade mocked. “Like he could tell.”

I untied Chooser and led him to where Spade had squared the anvil on the hard dirt. I held to the lead shank and patted the gelding’s neck.

“Chooser,” I told Spade. His black hair, head and body, had dried tightly curled as wire grass, and the air reeked of his dried sweat that drowned even the ammonia in the horse piss.

“Beggar,” Spade said. He looked to Charlie. Lucy, who couldn’t have slept at all, had come out with folding chairs. She stopped to listen. Lance settled in one of the chairs, peeled off his shades, and proceeded not to sweat.

“Chooser,” Charlie said. He settled into another of the chairs.

“Fifty-fifty,” Spade said. He looked from horse to horse and from Charlie to me.

“Sometimes lightning strikes,” I said.

“Mister Barnes showed ya, didn’t he?” Spade said. “Didn’t you show him, Mister Barnes?”

“Did it by his lonesome,” Charlie drawled. “Reckon that earns ‘im a seat on Beggar.”

Spade grinned real wide and shook his head.

“And I thought I moved fast,” he said to me. He’d picked up his hoof nippers and seemed poised to get busy on Chooser. Chooser groaned, cocked his tail, and dumped a load of turds for the swarming flies.

“Speed only counts when the clock’s tickin’,” I said.

“Never stops,” Spade said. “That’s what *real* winners know.”

Though Spade’s tone was light, I wasn’t sure if he’d complimented or insulted me. Charlie said something low to Lance, who came over and took Chooser’s lead shank.

“Give yourself time to eat and rest, Hendrix,” Charlie said. “We’ll see you shortly.”

I pulled out the pocket watch Granddaddy Hendrix had left me and wound its stem a few slow twists as he’d always done. Spade lowered Chooser’s hoof to trade the nippers for a rasp

from the portable table. He watched me winding the stem.

“It’s all about time,” I said.

“That it is,” he said. “See ya at the show.”

I drifted away with no real sense of going any place or doing anything other than checking my phone and maybe making some calls. My sweet little rich girl had texted me twice, just to let me know she was thinking of me. Love and kisses. Call when I could. I would, after the perf. I dialed the sale barn manager where I worked and asked if she might slide me some extra hours for the next two days.

“How useful you going to be with no sleep?” Maggie said. I pictured her toady, rouged cheeks imploding as she sucked the Marlboro Light. “You know I don’t hold with pill-poppers.” I promised her no pills and at least four hours sleep before I came to work.

Eventually I wound my way toward the stock pens behind the chutes to wait. Other guys gathered by the high pipe corrals, studying broncs, bulls, calves, and steers as if we might discover some secret advantage. Nobody said much. Dogging steers look pretty much the same: sad-eyed, raw-boned Mexican Corrientes with more horn and hide than flesh. The dun junker I’d drawn was neither biggest nor smallest, but from all I’d heard he was the trashiest. Few guys had even got him caught. Nobody had placed on him. And I’d come here full of hope as a Get-Well balloon. That dun rat meant to ruin my debut on Charlie’s horse. I wondered why Charlie was even willing to mount me, unless it was just to see if I had enough try in me that he might capitalize on later.

When the edginess got me I climbed off the tall fence and wandered through the alleys of vendors who’d set up in the shade of the grandstands. The night’s crowd was filing in: couples in jeans and denim shirts strolling hand-in-hand; moms and dads saying endless no’s to “Can-I-have-this?” kids; even some sunken-gummed old-timers rattling along in wheelchairs with oxygen bottles trailing. The crowd milled past the cotton candy booths, buying gaudy, feathered hats, John Wayne clocks on glossy fake walnut board, and cheap tack that’d break the first time it touched a horse. Some of them waited in line to have their pictures taken on a saddled

Longhorn steer that knelt for them to mount.

One and all they'd come out to the rodeo to watch guys like me risk injury for winners' checks most of us wouldn't get. But for a splinter of that crowd's life, I'd be the one whose name roared from the loud speakers into the night, the one their eyes were fixed on when the chute gates sprang open, and if I could ever get my game right, I'd be the one who galloped the Victory Lap when the event ended, the one who got the most applause and the check. Even if this wasn't to be my night, it was reason enough to keep going down the road. It was reason enough not to marry a sweet little rich girl who wanted — no matter how she denied it — her man's boots beside her bed every night.

When I spotted Charlie and the others riding toward the arena, I stepped behind a blooming onion stand to watch them pass like the rodeo royalty they were. In front rode Charlie on Chooser, ponying Beggar. Both horses' black manes and tails were freshly braided, their bright bay coats shining as if they'd been waxed. I allowed, (and rightly, I later learned) that the braids were Lucy's handiwork. Charlie wore a crisp red denim shirt and clean Silver Belly Stetson. He rode slightly slouched as if nearly asleep, his lower lip bulging with Cope. Lance, Lucy, and Spade trailed him three abreast, Lance on Scooter, Spade on Mick the hazing horse, and Lucy in the middle on her barrel horse, Pancho. All five horses traveled smoothly, calmly, their necks level, ears forward, gliding flat-footed on loose reins, everything I'd ever read about Barnes horses.

Given my sorry draw, I found myself wishing I'd met Charlie another time, another place. I wished, for the only time I could ever recall, that I could be a spectator and just watch the Barnes machinery work instead of being the flawed cog. Granddaddy's voice came again to me: "Them that expect nothing are seldom disappointed." I'd drawn a nothing steer. Everybody should've expected nothing of me. But just being mounted on a Barnes dogging horse made people expect something of you. And I knew what Charlie expected, no matter the draw. The mantra of his books and videos was to "demand a championship run every time the gate rattled, regardless the Cattle, Conditions, and Competition." He called it "The Three C's of

Championship.”

I hurried to Flatlander, changed shirts, and hustled to back the arena just in time to see the Grand Entry. Lucy was leading it, carrying the U.S. flag at a high lope on her sweet sorrel gelding, Pancho, who flowed on a loose rein limber and smooth as a rocking horse. Despite my daddy’s noble efforts to prevent it, I’d been called all my life toward something I could only call rodeo. I’d long known the word, but not its meaning, not the way to make it become something I could hold the way it held me. Now, feeling all the complicated feelings about meeting Charlie, I wasn’t sure what had happened, but I knew something had. No matter what shipwreck I got into with the steer, I knew that in the last few hours rodeo had gained a name and had become a thing I could hold. That name, I knew, was Barnes.

After they’d bucked the last bareback horse, I went to where Charlie and the others had gathered behind the timed event chutes. They’d tied the horses along the fences and were mingling with other guys to pass the time. That edgy, pre-run laughter rolled on air saturated with the hot ammonia smell of crowded cattle. Much as I wanted to be part of all the stories, I passed at a distance and acted as if I hardly noticed the clustered guys. The calf roping would be next, then saddle broncs, then bulldogging. Throw in a few clowns antics and announcer jokes, and we had fifteen, maybe twenty minutes yet to wait. I went back to the steer pen and leaned on the steel rails, fighting my nerves.

A few minutes later Charlie reined so close I felt Chooser’s breath on my arm. Charlie stayed in the saddle, his big, dark hands folded easy on the swells, reins creased in his left. Slouched, with his dark eyes droopy below the Stetson’s silver brim, Charlie seemed almost asleep. Chooser, too, stood relaxed, one knee cocked, his eyes half closed. Charlie spoke to me in a low, calm voice.

“Yore steer’s a dirty bad bastard, trashy from nostril to tail switch,” Charlie drawled. His eyes looked toward the dun steer without really looking at him. “I’ve seen him go plenty. One time he’ll break clean and race you to the back side. Next time he’ll fake a move, balk in the chute, and let you break out. Other times he’s liable to climb the hazing horse. Lots of guys ride

by, no shame. The few times I've actually seen guys bend a knee on him, he throwed on the brakes and fed 'em a horn."

"Why's he still in the draw?" I said.

"Hell," Charlie said, "it's rodeo. If you do get out clean and get him caught before he sets, he'll come around the corner pretty nice."

"Sounds like one big *if*," I said.

Charlie turned in the saddle, lowered his eyes, and looked, really looked, at me, into me, the full weight of his gaze as heavy on me as hands. He was inside my head the way I'd heard he could be.

"The difference between you and them wrecks I described," he said smooth as saddle butter, "is two things. One, they didn't have Beggar's gas. You got the speed to make damn shore the steer's out clean before you come a-clackin'. Second, not to brag, but they didn't have me hazin'. You'll get a decent go. What you do with him after the catch, that's tween you and the Arena Gods."

He reined Chooser around and rode back to where the guys were gathered. Time flowed as if in a dream. I barely remember who bulldogged before me. I can't say I even remember walking into the arena. Nor do I remember adjusting the stirrups, though I know I had to, nor swinging into the saddle, nor the crowd in the stands, nor other doggers and ropers lining the top rails of the chutes.

What I do remember is the strength of Beggar's stride, how even at a walk his muscles rippled as if my weight worried him not one whit. And I remember that before I rode into the box Charlie reined Chooser so tight against me that our stirrups bumped. He offered final instructions.

"See that pole yonder," he said. I turned in the saddle and looked with him to the third tall green steel pole in the high fence that divided the arena from the filled bleachers.

Right there," he said. "Be ready." I nodded like I believed him. I wished I could. We waited in the arena, facing the boxes, while the ground crew pushed the dusty dun steer into the

chute. He sulled up and balked. Somebody buzzed him with a hot shot. He bawled, reared, and slung a leg over the top rail, which stalled everything until two rail birds hopped down and pried him back into place. Beggar flicked his ears, but stood quiet on a slack rein.

“Go light with the left spur,” Charlie said, “when ya square Beggar in the box. Light on his bit, too. He knows his job. And one final thing”

I suspected he was testing to see if I’d lost consciousness. The announcer was telling the crowd about me, how I was a Missouri boy come lately to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, fresh off a win at Claremore.

“What?” I asked Charlie. The steer lunged in the chute, his wide, white-tipped horns scraping the steel pipes. The announcer was so short of things to say that he’d started telling the history of bulldogging all the way back to Bill Pickett, the Black cowboy who’d invented my the sport on the famous old 101 Ranch.

“Get out clean. Stay wide til you’re close.”

“That’s two things,” I said. The first reminded me not to break the barrier and take the ten-second penalty, called “take ten with ya” or “plus ten.” The second was more complicated. When a steer runs down the arena, the dogger has two tasks to get in the Go-Hole. The first is to eliminate the distance advantage, which is pure horse speed and could be done without running close to the steer at all. The horse could pass the steer thirty feet to its left and beat it to the back side. But to bulldog, the horse needs to be close enough for the dogger to drape the steer’s back with his right arm. Three feet is about right. On an honest steer, you can ride a straight line right to him. But on a cheater like I’d drawn, everybody, especially the dogging horse, had to work a little harder, run a little farther. Charlie was telling me to close the distance advantage first as if I really was going to blast by wide without bulldogging then rein in tight against the steer at the last possible moment. He had told me to do two separate acts.

“Think of ‘em as one,” Charlie said, dry as toast, “but do both.”

I clucked Beggar to the back of the dogging box, reined him around, squared him with the light left spur like Charlie’d said, and eased him back into the corner with light tugs on his

bit. He coiled, haunches jammed against the planks, forefeet braced, ears pricked, muzzle quivering, tendons flexing taut as new barbed wire. I let him settle. He stood keen as a quail dog on point. I locked my left hand on the saddle horn, adjusted the reins in my right, and gave a quick glance across the chute to where Charlie sat sleepily in the hazer's box with just the slightest pressure on Chooser's bit. In his right hand Charlie held the reins. In his left he gripped his fiberglass dogging bat, its popper tucked under his arm. The ground crew had strung and pinned the barrier string in front of me, but as the hazer Charlie was free to leave any time, which was key to the whole deal. The steer had stopped squirming and now stood square.

"It won't get no better," Charlie drawled. The gate man atop the chute watched my eyes.

I raised my chin. I focused on the steer's bony shoulder blades. I nodded my face. The steer faked his lunge, then froze. Beggar flinched but stayed in his bit, trembling like a jet engine. A flash later the steer made his move for real, this time flat-out flying for the backside. He'd cleared rib to the pen before I chucked the bit to Beggar. The steer faded hard toward Chooser, but Charlie had him clattering along in perfect position. Chooser's left shoulder glided along inches from the steer's bobbing horns, Charlie pacing them stride for stride, waving his dogging bat in the steer's face to keep him straight and slow him a tad.

Beggar came on low and fast, his ears pinned flat to his braided mane, his nose stretched like a greyhound's toward the steer. I gripped the saddle horn to hold myself forward against the force of his lunges. Showers of clods clunked against the box pads and chute as Beggar dug for traction, each stride longer, lower, viciously faster. Exactly beside the pole where Charlie had said it would happen, Beggar's nose came even with the steer's hip. I reined him hard right to close the gap. Charlie was yelling, "Get down in there! Get off! Get off! Get off!" He whipped at the steer with his hazing bat to keep him from crowding Chooser. For an instant I dreaded Charlie's dogging bat more than the threat of a crash. Then Beggar's nose passed the steer's ribs. In two strides it'd be too late to do anything but ride by — which wasn't going to happen. I bent my knee and dropped down in the well, my left hand still gripping the saddle horn, to drape the steer's body with my right arm and set my boots for the slide.

When he felt me shift, Beggar broke hard to the left and ripped my right boot free of the flying stirrup. For an instant, things got wide and wild. I swiped my hand at the steer's left horn. He cocked his head and dove hard toward Chooser, hooking the tip of his right horn on Charlie's boot. The jolt knocked the steer back into me, his left horn snapping like the tail of a whip against my face. Blood filled my mouth so fast I had to spit or choke. I somehow stayed on my feet, but I was so out of position that all I could do was pedal and bounce beside the bawling, bucking steer as he ripped off my jean pocket with his left hind hoof then pawed my shirt.

"Go on! Shape him! Go on!" Charlie yelled until he thundered out of hearing. I bore down on the steer's shoulders and kicked my boots in front of me for the slide. The steer bucked and drove me forward with such force that dust fogged off my sliding boots. Blood shot from my nose so fast I couldn't breathe right. The announcer was working the crowd to a frenzy. I twisted to the left and cranked down hard on the left horn as I lifted the right horn, curling the steer's shaggy head left left left around my waist to shape him for the fall. When his nose came up, I released the left horn and drove my arm under the steer's jaw then hurled my weight backward. His body snapped sharp left then went airborne. We crashed with a huge thud that knocked the wind from us both, all four of his hooves pointed skyward like crooked posts.

"Did you folks hear that?" the announcer howled. "What a thump! What a big thump!"

I lay there on my back, spitting blood and cradling the steer's antlers until Charlie rode back leading Beggar. When I let him up, the steer trotted away slinging shit and shaking his head.

"Six-point-seven seconds!" the speakers blared. It was two seconds too slow to win a check, but way faster than that steer had ever been thrown. The announcer milked the audience to clap because "your applause is the only payment this cowboy's going to get after that Great. Big. Thump." They paid me with the palms of their hands. I took the reins from Charlie and swung on Beggar for the ride back to the chutes. The saddle creaked as we rode. When Charlie saw how bloody I was, he shook his head grimly.

"Sport's a good bit more fun if you'll catch horns with yore hands 'stead of yore nose.

Big Thump.”

I gave Charlie a “Who-the-hell-is-Big-Thump?” glare and spit out another mouthful of blood. Already the announcer was talking up the next gunner, who sat waiting to ride in the box.

“We’d best clear the arena ‘fore they fine us for holdin’ up the rodeo,” Charlie said. Then, with a tone closer to compassionate than he usually cared to trespass, he added, “And you might ought to visit the medical tent — Big Thump.”

So instead of a check I’d earned a scar and a nickname. Wouldn’t the folks back home be proud? I rode with my aching face turned to the side so I wouldn’t bleed on Charlie’s horse or gear. My jeans and shirt were blood-splattered, my jeans minus a hind pocket, my shirt’s back striped with shitty hoofmarks. But I had caught and thrown the sorriest steer in the pen. And people had clapped. I wasn’t surprised I hadn’t placed. I wasn’t even surprised I’d been bloodied. I wasn’t surprised Charlie made fun of me. All those things were, as Charlie might say, rodeo.

What did surprise me was the change in Spade. He was sitting easy astraddle Scooter, three deep in the line-up, when I rode past him. He spun Scooter and followed me to the fence where I meant to tie Beggar. In a loud purple shirt and dark shades with his black hat tugged low, he looked every bit the star Coldwell later convinced him he could become.

“Damn fine run,” Spade said. “Took balls.”

“Might have” I said. “Been too busy with my face to check down there.”

The crowd cheered when the announcer called out a 4.2 for the dogger who’d just gone. Charlie reined Chooser in next to Spade.

“How ‘bout the way Big Thump rattled right down into Death Valley?” Charlie said. “Yea, though I walk through the shadow of the Valley —”

“Big Thump?” Spade said. He seemed to be measuring my nickname against my size. “Fits,” he said. “Fits fine.” One of the judges walked over between runs and asked did I want him to call the ambulance. If not, ought he call somebody from the med tent?

“He’s with us,” Spade said. He said it the way a man claims a drunken friend just before slugging a bouncer.

“We’ll tend to him,” Charlie said.

But they didn’t. I wouldn’t let them. I watched the steer wrestling while my nose bullied both eyes mostly closed. The next dogger wasted his run by trying to muck the steer down without shaping him, stopping the clock in a mediocre 6.2. seconds on a five-flat steer. Nobody clapped. The guy looked sick for wasting a money run.

Then it was Spade’s turn. The announcer told the crowd what a great steer Spade had drawn. He bragged on Spade’s recent wins, his sudden rise from obscurity, his race with his hauling buddy Lance for Rookie of the Year. This could be the run to watch, the one to watch, the announcer said. I felt like it was all as scripted, like I need not stay. With Charlie mounting Spade and hazing the poodle of the pen for him the go-round check was good as cashed. It’d happen without me.

I wondered — as Coldwell later argued — if it would’ve happened even without Spade, without Charlie, as if all life’s dramas had been in place since the birth of time and we are born only to provide new casts, new audiences, new critics. The unwritten scripts of time were always there for a changing cast of characters. What’d it matter if I watched? This is what I asked myself. But I had to. I wanted to see Scooter go. I wanted to watch Charlie haze. And, since I wasn’t a threat to win anything, I wanted Spade to make a great run. Winning a go-round at Ft. Smith would be worth \$3200 and set Spade up for a super run at the average if he did anything at all with his second steer.

The brown spotted steer walked into the chute and stood calm as a Holstein cow in a milking stanchion. Spade had Scooter wedged in the corner of the dogging box, quartered to break in the right lead. Scooter’s ears flicked forward and backward, alert. He turned his head slightly to the right as if checking for himself to see if Charlie had Chooser set in the hazing box.

“How much?” Spade called to Charlie.

“Hip to the pen,” Charlie said. Always coaching, always studying steers, Charlie’d call, “Hip to the pen” on slower cattle. On the real runners he might call, “Ear to the pen,” which amounted to little more than nodding your face and riding. On one a tad slower he’d call,

“Shoulder to the pen,” meaning to see a shoulder past the end of the chute before letting the dogging horse run. Timing the start was crucial. Few guys bulldogged well enough to win by being late out of the box. Nobody ever bulldogged well enough to win by taking the ten-second penalty for breaking the barrier before the steer tripped it. The goal was always to be “in the string,” with the horse’s chest hitting the barrier at the instant the rope draped around the steer’s neck pulled the pin. Hip to the pen was a long score, saved for a slow looper like the poodle steer Spade had drawn. It meant, too, that Charlie would lay back until he saw the same move.

The gate man twisted in his seat atop the chute and watched Spade for the signal. Spade raised his chin, took a breath, and nodded. Scooter left off Spade’s hand when the steer was about shoulder to the pen, shocking Charlie. Spade, seeing his mistake, double-clutched Scooter, standing in the stirrups to throttle him against the bit. But it was too late. Scooter blasted ahead, Spade already getting off, the barrier ripped plumb in two. Three strides from the chute, with Charlie not even in the picture, Spade knifed off Scooter, snatched the poodle steer’s antlers, and waved him in 3.6. That would’ve moved him into first — if the judge hadn’t lifted the broken barrier above his head for the time keeper to see. “Plus ten,” the judge called out. Spade’s time went on the scoreboard at 13.6, out of the round and out of the average. If the Arena Gods were kind, he might win something in the second go, nothing more.

It wouldn’t have been an opportune time to talk with Charlie or Spade. My face throbbed. The bleeding inside my nose and mouth ought to have stopped by then. I limped out of the arena, through the shadowy littered underbelly of the grandstands, and between parked rodeo rigs, some lighted, some dark, their gas-powered generators idling as air conditioners hummed. Inside people were cool and comfortable. Throwing myself a little pity party, I mused that things were as they’d always been and would always be: poor boys like me on the outside looking in, beaten for their dreams. I got sort of sappy sentimental about my pretty little rich girl’s love for me. I wished she were there to tend my wounds and make me feel — as such women excel at doing — that I was her hero. I meant to call her.

When I found Flatlander, I peeled out of my ripped shitty shirt, washed myself in a

rubber water bucket that I'd confiscated from Charlie's rig, and downed some contraband painkillers with a hot Coors Light that'd been rolling around the floor of my camper since the last killing frost. The horn had ripped my left nostril, leaving a jagged tear over an inch long that wouldn't heal pretty. The blood I'd been spitting must've spilled into my mouth from nasal passages. I rinsed the rip, doused it with rubbing alcohol from the medicine kit I kept behind my seat, and packed my nostril with cotton from the painkiller bottle. Folding the skin together as best I could, I cinched it with duct tape I kept in my toolbox. It'd have to do. The rodeo dance and whatever else the Arena Gods had scripted for the remainder of that night would have to cast and act itself out without me.

I fumbled around until I found my phone, on it a series of text and voice messages from my sweet worried rich girl. I'd left the ringer off all day. I started to call her and say, "Honey, I had stuck a horn up my nostril," and let her baby-coo me to sleep with tender love talk. How differently this story might've ended if I had. Instead, I passed out.

Chapter Seven

Thunder shook the walls of my camper like two drumming fists. They were two drumming fists — Lucy's. I groaned and rolled onto my back, deciphering where I was and how I'd got there. My blood-crusting eyelids wouldn't open. I pried them apart with my fingers and squinted in the direction of Lucy's voice. She pressed her face to my window screen between her cupped hands.

"Pulse check," she said. "The oddsmakers are laying 6-1 you survived. Almost noon."

"Noon?" I said. "Holy shit."

I'd been due at seven to work the sale barn. By now the manager had likely worried herself into firing me just to be shed of such grief. My sweet little rich girl surely thought me dead and likely both of us better for it. My head throbbed. I wanted to puke. It was the worst one-hot-beer hangover ever. Then I touched my duct-taped nose and realized my gut was tumbling from my own swallowed blood.

"Uncle Charlie said for you to come shower and inspect the carnage in the cool."

"Loan me a water bucket," I groaned. The pills still had me. "Later."

Lucy hopped inside my camper, spurs tink-tinking, holding the bucket I'd confiscated the night before. She wore yesterday's clothes, shorts, tee-shirt, visor and all. Hands on her hips, she sneered at my sheets, pillow cases, and shirt.

"I've seen less bloody butcher shops," she said. She pinched her nose and stepped out. "If you don't mind, drop your dirty clothes just outside our door before you shower. There's a good laundromat four blocks west, half a block north, on your right."

"Just refill that bucket," I said. "Or loan me a hose so I can hunt a hydrant."

"If you want to piss off Uncle Charlie," she said, "refuse his hospitality."

She left. I floundered around until I found my phone and checked new messages: one each hour since six from my sweet worried little rich girl, one from the sale barn manager at seven-thirty. I'd left the ringer off again. I was too sick to indulge my sweet little rich girl the

chewing I deserved just yet, so I dialed the sale barn. When I asked to talk to the manager, the secretary-bookkeeper stalled. Then came a blend of whispering and curses before she asked would I like to leave a message. I gave the abridged version of my wreck and said I'd still like to work the next day, Friday. "Best call first," she said, which meant I was fired.

I dragged my sorry carcass off the mattress and shuffled outside into the noon heat, shirtless, to examine myself in a side mirror. Eventually my eyes located themselves in the swells of purple, puffy skin divided by a bloody ridge of duct tape. Crusted blood streaked my neck, shoulders, and chest like exposed veins. My hair hung stiff, stuck together. Sweat beads formed and ran, smearing the blood. I looked so much like the dust jacket of a horror movie that I wondered if I'd only imagined washing myself in the borrowed bucket before I passed out.

I climbed in my camper, gathered a change of clothes, and shuffled hangdog to Charlie's rig, craving the shower Lucy'd offered. Beggar and Chooser, nibbling from hay bags hung to the trailer, pricked their ears and snorted when they whiffed blood. Topsy crept forward on her belly until her collar drew the chain taut. I knocked on the door. No answer. I called out. Still nobody answered. I let myself in and stripped to my Jockeys in air so cool it drew goose bumps. I called out again. Still no answer. But now — I confess — I heard the shower. The bathroom door stood half open, a dusty pair of spurred ropers flopped against it. Cutoffs, a tee-shirt, a white sports bra and panties lay where they'd dropped on the tile. Clean Wranglers and a long-sleeved loud pink button-up shirt draped hangers on the doorknob. I need not have looked to know it was Lucy. But how could I *not* look? I eased sideways and saw her lathered body distorted behind the shower doors. Distorted or not, her body rose in the steam as luscious and curvy as a three-swirl cone. I backed away thinking I'd sneak out, wait a bit, then knock. But of course the water stopped and the floor boards surrendered me. Draped in a towel, Lucy slid open the shower door as casually as if we'd agreed to meet there.

"All yours," she said, swiping a stray hair from her face. "All yours."

"I'd no idea — "

"It's hard for me," she said, letting the line settle, "to believe you ever lacked ideas."

I stood stiff as a Frederick Remington spear in my Jockeys, convinced that the time for modesty and discretion had long fled. Her loose black hair curled in shining wet strands curled around themselves. Over the air conditioner's hum came the drone of an engine pulling close. I dreaded Charlie finding us like that. Clothes in hand, Lucy walked to the door and peered out, frowning then relaxing as she closed the door again. The truck stopped but moved on. She hung her clothes on the door knob.

"Not him," she said. "Antiseptic and Band-Aids in the sink drawer."

"What if it had been?"

"He invited you to shower."

"With you?"

She lowered her eyes to my Jockeys.

"You definitely need a long, cool rinse," she said. "You're as white as my butt. See?"

Her emerald eyes calm, she hiked the towel up real slow and whacked her left butt cheek so hard she left a print. Her eyes drove mine to the floor. She'd made me look down. I wanted to ask how a nice girl like her knew a fire-pole stripper's trick. She had to be acting — or so I told myself. As rebounding girls are prone to do, she had to be pretending the breakup wasn't paining her, one quick tick short of blowing. She, like Spade, carried an air of desperation, a hint of madness that rattled me. As much as I'd fought the question, I'd begun to wonder if Charlie Barnes' rig might be madness on wheels.

I stepped into the bathroom and drew the door. Then, meaning to limber my stiffened member, I clicked the lock, which drew a snicker from Lucy. I didn't care. I had trouble aplenty already without being busted for lathering their Blessed Virgin. I just wanted to feel clean and think clear. If the pain lessened, that'd be a bonus. At first, before the stinging started in my face, the water felt so cool and kind that I held my head under it and scrubbed as if I could scrub away the memories of the bad run and all bad runs I'd ever made. But when I tugged off the soggy duct tape and soaped my torn nostril, the slash stung like a tetanus booster. I clamped my teeth and scrubbed. The bleeding picked up, so I allowed I'd best find the Band-Aids Lucy had

mentioned. But when I open the shower and reached for the cabinet, I heard several voices, one of them fatally familiar and a long ways from home. I slipped on my clothes and realized I'd forgotten socks. In clean jeans and shirt, I shuffled from the bathroom barefoot with a bloody washrag over my nose.

There by the door stood Spade and Charlie, leaning patiently as hitched horses against the wall. On the couch sat Lucy, drawing the brush in long, slow, strokes through her wet black curls that darkened the shoulders of her pink blouse. And beside her — trying to smile as if we'd arranged to meet for lunch — sat my sweet worried rich girl, come all the way from Okie City to see why her sorry-ass excuse for a squeeze hadn't called. All decked out in heels, a breezy red skirt, and a low-cut white blouse topped off with a wide blue scarf, she'd worried herself into leaving from work for the four-hour drive to Ft. Smith.

So my sweet little neatness freak sat watching her ringless fingers finger my filthy jeans and socks on the neatly creased lap of her breezy red skirt. My crusted jeans lay on her lap, folded as if she'd just laundered them, the sweat-stained socks rolled together at the top as if she meant to lay them in a drawer. She seemed, uncharacteristically, not to notice the flakes of blood and dirt crumbling onto her red skirt like freshly ground pepper onto a ripe tomato. As she slowly raised her eyes she gripped more tightly to my jeans — the higher her eyes, the tighter her grip — clinging as a sparrow in a storm clings to a bobbing limb.

“This lovely lady done declared you MIA, Big Thump,” Spade said. He eyed my sweet little rich girl like a hungry dog eyes a raw T-bone. “Lucky I directed her right to you, safe here with Miss Lucy. Might want to get yourself a better calling plan, amigo.”

For a too long short time there was only the hum of the air conditioner as my sweet worried rich girl, her stoic smile cracking, read each face left to right before settling on mine. She had too much breeding to break in the company of strangers.

“What's happened to you, Chance?” she asked. She wasn't even looking at my nose.
“What's happened to you?”

“It's takes some tellin',” I said. I went to her, lifted her by a hand, and ushered her out.

“Let’s not bore these folks with a story they already know.”

Like an overzealous usher, Spade opened the door and bowed. His dark eyes glowed.

“I’m sure there’s parts we aint heard,” he said, winking. “A few new details.”

To keep from smacking Spade, I turned to Charlie and shook his hand.

“I’m grateful for your kindness, Mister Barnes,” I said. I looked to Spade then to Lucy, determined to show class for my soon-to-be ex sweet little girl. “And to all of you.”

Charlie nodded grimly. Spade half hid a smirk. Lucy sat calmly as a spider watching flies circle her web. My sweet worried girl’s hand trembled in mine as we made our way down the steps, past her sparkling new blue Beemer convertible, and toward my camper. The sun zapped us. A hot gust lifted her skirt, scarf, and hair, blonde and light as corn silks. It was one of those times when no words proved just the right number. At Flatlander, she stopped me in the doorway and pointed toward my bloody trashed bed, where she’d centered the empty beer bottle between the pain pills and my phone.

“You could’ve picked up any of the three,” she said. “Alcohol, pills, or your phone. Obviously, only two of them mattered.” The first tears streaked her cheeks. It was past the point of telling her I’d meant to call, or that I didn’t want to worry her until I knew for sure how hurt I was, though both were true.

“Those pills!” she shrieked. She set to beating my chest with both fists. “You said you’d pitched them.”

“I did,” I mumbled. “I pitched them under the bed.” She slugged me again. And again. She started to sob but choked it, turning her head and swallowing as if she’d caught strep throat. When I reached for her she spun away and stomped to her car. I followed, but knew not to reach for her. She slid under the steering wheel and started the engine. In the distance, Lucy’s face appeared beside Spade’s in the window beside the king bed over the gooseneck. I tried not to lead my sweet hurt rich girl’s gaze to them, but I’d already done it.

“Your new family,” she said. Now she was all out bawling. “Should I look for you in the standings under ‘Chance Barnes’? Or — no no, I’ve got it! — ‘Big Thump’ Barnes? More like

‘Big Dump’! You’re a shit, S-H-I-T, for a man. I can smell you. Daddy tried to tell me that no matter what you call shit, it still stinks.”

She wanted and rightly deserved the knee-crawling plea for forgiveness that I didn’t give her, couldn’t. Not with the others watching. Which she knew. Which made her hate me more.

“Of no importance,” she said, eerily calm, like when the wind dies seconds before the tornado drops its tail. “What matters is that at last I understand. After a night’s worry and a day’s drive, I finally understand why you couldn’t love me, Chance. Now I see. It’s because I was good to you. I promised a good life. Good. To. You. Damn me for that.”

She jammed the Beemer in reverse, launching a cloud of dust and short sunburned blades of flying Bermuda grass. She shifted to a forward gear, sped close, and flashed me one final tear-streaked gaze meant to be so profound, beautiful, and tragic that I would never forget the moment. It must’ve worked.

As she sped from sight between the endless rows of parked rigs, I hoped no kids, dogs, or horses darted into her path, for any death that occurred would be mine by proxy.

“Big Thump,” came Charlie’s drawl through the settling dust. He stood in the open doorway of his trailer. The faces were gone from the window.

“When ya’ll gather yoreself up, I gotta deal we might could work,” he said. “Profit us both.” Always the sensitive guy. I nodded so he’d know I heard. I walked in circles for a bit, kicking pebbles with my bare feet, until I accepted that my sweet little rich girl was the kind of gone that stays gone. Then I wiped my face clear and started toward Charlie’s rig. As if cool were of no concern to those who own it, he’d left the door open.

Chapter Eight

It was a case of the deal with Charlie being sealed before it was revealed. As if, heart-sick or not, I'd nix Charlie's offer of an "apprenticeship." The terms would be simple and — need I say? — to Charlie's advantage. I'd do whatever he told me to do whenever and for as long and as often as he told me to do it. In exchange for Charlie's coaching and all the practice cattle I could stand, I'd live in a hay loft, tend stock, muck stalls, mend fence, oil tack, twist bolts, and lope sorry colts in circles until the blisters on my butt grew blisters of their own. He asked did I have questions.

"What about money?" I said.

"Won't charge ya a thang," Charlie said. "Even throw in your eats."

The eats, he swore, would be tolerable now that he'd hired Elena, a wiry, widowed Mexican grandmother whose husband, Garcia, had "died from a split personality — one on each side of a four-foot packing-house bone saw." Charlie straightened his hand into a blade and dragged it slowly down his skull and chest for emphasis, saying, "ZZZZZZZZZZZZaaarrrrooom."

"Her thumb's green as her work card," Charlie added. "Grows the best maters and okra ever fried. Crust you'd druther kiss than chew." He was getting weepy on me. Sad images of my ex-sweet pretty little rich girl leaked in. When, I said, could I start? I was thinking next week. Charlie, adrift in his okra-induced trance, turned to me as if I'd interrupted sex.

"Start?" he said. "How 'bout we say September? After Labor Day."

September. September? All my life, September had meant back to school. So when else ought my six-month enslavement begin but in September? Not waiting on my answer, really — because he already knew it — but there because he had to be somewhere, Charlie lay where he'd flopped hatless on the long black couch, the latest *Quarter Horse Journal* open, his socks propped on the far arm rest. Spade and Lucy lay on the bed over the gooseneck critiquing videotapes of Lucy's barrel racing runs they played on the thirteen-inch built-in Sony. If they'd noticed I was in the rig, they hadn't shown it. They seemed to be attempting kindness.

"September suit ya?" he said. I calculated that I'd be indentured until March, six months.

“What about The Buildings?” I said. “The Buildings” is the term for the series of cashy winter rodeos such as Houston, Dallas, Indianapolis, and Ft. Worth, held either inside domes or else outside in the deep South, beginning with Denver in January. They pay such cashy purses that whoever comes away from The Buildings in the Top Fifteen more times than not stays there. Charlie scoffed.

“Only buildin’ you’ll enter is mine,” he said.

“I’ll just stay home and practice?”

“Wish I’d thought of it,” he said.

“No rodeos?”

“Let some other smucks put up the added money.”

“No rodeos?”

“Maybe an ammie, now and again.”

“You’d send me to ammies?”

“Not ‘til yore ready.”

It was a godawful insult. Spade and Lucy snickered. I felt myself tightening inside. Sense of humor be damned, Charlie was serious about demoting me from the pro trail to the practice pen and amateur rodeos, which he’d just implied I couldn’t handle. And the insult came after I’d made the best run ever on the sorry set-up steer.

“Don’t take this wrong, Mister Barnes,” I said, “but I allow I’ve damn sure earned some respect, if nothin’ else.”

Everybody got quiet. Charlie took out his Cope, packed a fresh wad in his jaw, and put the can back in his shirt pocket, a slow, thoughtful ritual.

“No doubt about it, Big Thump,” he said, scruffing his graying mane. “Now go cash it. Then come tell me how it spends.”

“No pro rodeos?”

“Not til yore ready.”

“By whose judgement?”

“Yore’n.”

“You don’t trust it now.”

“Neither do you.”

“But you’ll trust it later?”

“You will. Only trouble with you, Big Thump, is you aint been nowhere.” In his unique twisted logic that somehow always made sense, Charlie added, “And you wouldn’t’ve knowed what to do if you’d got there.” I let my mind unravel that. Still hoping to move things faster, I tested another idea.

“Don’t you need anybody for the summer?” I said. “Who’s tendin’ things now?”

“My messicans got it covered til fall,” he said. “Eddie and Freddie.” Their full names, I learned, were Eduardo and Fernando, two pretty decent old vacqueros whose main fears were Charlie, the INS, and God, in that order. They relied on Elena to translate Charlie’s orders and make sure Charlie paid right. Elena never told them she couldn’t count past the number of eggs it took to bake Charlie’s beloved chocolate chip cookies.

“So it’s September?” I said.

“September,” he said.

Chapter Nine

Following my second steer at Ft. Smith — a mushhog that I mucked to the mat in 7.8 while *nobody* clapped — I turned in the keys to my rented tin tepee south of Tahlequah and did what failed college graduates do: I went home to my north Missouri folks to work the summer.

I took some comfort in being far from the memories of my ex-sweet pretty little rich girl who, I heard within the month, began dating the man of her schemes. As for Lucy, what can I say? Despite her daring little bare-buttred swat at the shower scene, we'd shared neither sex, secrets, nor supper. She hadn't even been on the grounds when I ran my second steer, and she'd left without goodbye. I didn't even have a phone number for her, which meant I'd have to ask Charlie for it, which meant I wouldn't. But Lucy, if she wanted my number, had likely already pilfered it from Charlie's files. My instincts told me I'd been her mental mattress partner between breaking up and making up with Limp Dick. Yet my inner masochist craved her call.

My folks were plenty glad for the help and company, though they couldn't pay me more than great meals, Downy-smelling laundry, and a little grazing trap with shade and water for my horses.

"Ought to be great training for your apprenticeship," Daddy'd goad me over one of Momma's brisket or grilled chicken dinners. Worry had aged him more than work until at about Charlie's age Daddy looked ten years older. Debt had grooved his weathered face and dulled his once bright brown eyes to a haggard hazel the hue of an old rooster's. And the weight of debt, worry, and work was bending his broad shoulders in and down like the same rooster's tired wings folding closed after a lost battle.

"Hard work and no pay," he'd tease. He'd eye my scar, sometimes touch it, and add, "All the amenities except bodily injury."

To shush him, Momma would turn to me and say as if she almost believed it, "We're pleased you're willing to sacrifice for your dreams, Chance."

Momma, patient in the way only mothers can be, carried her years as lightly as she'd carried the pompom in her cheerleader's hands. She somehow sorted worry from work in ways

Daddy couldn't or wouldn't. Long past forty, she held her girlish figure and healthy glow from careful diet and plenty of outdoor work. Her job teaching high school English justified better care for herself, too: nails, skin, naturally curly blonde hair, in ways that made younger women envious and Daddy proud. She wanted him to be proud of me. She wanted it for herself, too, but less, I sensed, than she wanted it for him.

"So long as your life is the only one you sacrifice," Daddy'd say. The weight of Granddaddy's ghost rode heavier still across his bent shoulders, and the deepening drought that summer bore down more yet. I asked for no wages, and even though I did any job they needed done, I felt wrong eating there without buying groceries.

What money I did earn came mainly from hiring myself out when somebody needed a hay hand or cattle gathered and worked. That, and the local newspaper paid me a buck per column inch when I free-lanced human interest stories. I wrote about such oddities as a ninety-two-year-old neighbor, Edy Kittner, four times widowed, who still milked and butchered goats for a living. Tough and handy as a hickory cane, Edy believed in Man's dominion over the animal kingdom, especially the animals who bought her meds and meals. Her ancient blue-veined hands hung curled and scaly as talons on the end of her scarecrow arms, but still she owned power enough to stroke a kid goat's muzzle with one hand while the other slit its jugular so clean it sliced off the bleat. "Killin' needn't be cruel," Edy Kittner said, her colorless old eyes peering through cataracts thick as quarters. "So long as it's done with love." And I wrote about blind seventeen-year-old Nelson Turpin, who'd broken the school record in the high hurdles. A stringer sent the story over the wire, and I got word that *Sports Illustrated* meant to send a real reporter. I didn't even save the clippings, but Momma did.

"Girls and stories only interest you til you know their end," she said. That day we were pushing bull calves up the crowding alley to Daddy, who was vaccinating and castrating them in the chute. "Someday you're going to meet the girl whose story eludes you. Then maybe I'll get my grandkids."

Daddy somehow heard her over all the bawling and banging in the chute, but in his

thinking way he waited to speak. He jammed the head gate closed on the neck of a four-weight red bull and wedged himself into the crowd alley tight against the calf while I cranked the calf's tail over its spine to stop it from kicking. Daddy bent under the bull calf, slit his sack, and relieved him of his testicles as the calf's quivering back arched like a cat's. Momma held out the nut bucket to catch the testicles for the fry we'd have, most likely with neighbors. Daddy straightened his back and stepped from the alley, he looking into me with those bloody nuts still dangling from his hand by the chords.

"No kids til the Good Lord helps you kick your addiction," he said. "Would that be too much to promise?" He tossed the nuts into the bucket with a plop-plop and wiped his bloody hands on his chaps then went for the syringe to vaccinate the new steer.

"Seems little enough to ask," I said, and that pacified Daddy.

Since my dogging horse Eli was crippled and there was nobody around Plainston to jump steers with anyway, I concentrated on calf roping. I roped calves at jackpots and smaller rodeos only a milk run away, winning just enough to keep me playing. When I had money I drank with high-school buddies — Jimmy "Turnit" Page, Freddy "Fart" Fartham, Greg Adams, Donnie Winston — who'd gone nowhere and bragged about it. They married, divorced, and paid child support to local girls. They worked their families' farms, body shops, construction companies, and automotive parts stores. Each believed he'd eventually hold title to whatever entity his family left him in charge of during the sliver of time between their daddies and their sons that they were content to call their lives. Some sweltering sleepless nights when the moon tugged at my sanity in the room where Granddaddy had passed, I prayed to the Arena Gods to make of me what they would so long as it wasn't the guys who'd stayed.

To remind myself why a man ought never marry, I squired the foul-mouthed former captain of our high school volleyball team, Cheli Collins, a green-eyed, six-foot brunette nymphomaniac whose kill shot could bruise a bull. At twenty-four she'd become a functioning alcoholic cosmetologist who dedicated herself in equal measure to attracting and repulsing men. I must've been drawn to her sense of balance. Cheli packed a tongue sharp enough to peel ripe

peaches and a heart hollow as a bell.

“Don’t even expect me to get off, cowboy,” she taunted me, “unless you mean the back of your horse.”

The night we hooked up at Delaney’s bar, she told me of a recurrent nightmare. In it she became her mother, a divorced small-town hairdresser. I needn’t tell her it wasn’t a nightmare. The only pleasure Cheli drew from life (other than salty-dog margaritas and mattress-slapping combat masked as lovemaking) romped about in the body of a giggly long-yearling daughter who loved to pet my horses and sometimes called me Da-ba. But when my morning presence got to be about as regular as a coffee cup at their breakfast table, the kid began to cry after me. Cheli took me aside one night when the kid was with her daddy.

“Chance,” she said. “Chance, you either got to commit to stay or else stay gone.”

No matter what unspeakable deeds I’d done to her, I’d not deceived her into thinking my intentions were remotely honorable.

“We’re poison together,” I said as gently as a man can say such things. “Pure poison.”

“I know,” she said, almost wistful. “The stronger the potency, the shorter the suffering.” She was three margaritas deep into drowning any optimism tomorrow might’ve breathed into her tired little life when I nosed Flatlander down the washboard gravel driveway from her double-wide for the last time. She never called. I never called.

Chapter Ten

The next Sunday afternoon — by now it was August — who did call but Miss Lucinda Rose Barnes? I didn't recognize the number when it showed in my phone. Though we hadn't talked since Ft. Smith, she opened with "Like we decided . . . ," though in truth we'd decided nothing. And she chattered as casually as if she'd been talking through the wall in the next room all the while. She didn't say my name. She didn't say hers. She just opened with, "Like we decided" Did she think I'd recognize her number? Who knows? She didn't stop talking long enough for me to ask.

She was rolling south on I-29 after the Sunday matinee perf at Sidney, Iowa, where she stood to win third in the average if her times held. Only four barrel racers yet to go could move her out of the money. And — oh, by the way — wouldn't I like to meet her parents?

She'd caught me at the back side of my folks' place, knee-deep in muck, swatting mosquitoes and stretching barbed wire across a boggy creek bad overgrown with brush. The stink of sun-baked blue mud and brush-hogged jimson weeds stuffed my nose and made my voice sound as if I had a cold.

"Come again?" I said, sure I'd heard wrong. Were they in the truck? I splattered a blood-fat mosquito and scratched the swelling welt on my throat, wondering how much further apart two worlds could be than mine from hers. I'd heard her folks owned a major cashy showplace in the shrinking country north of K.C.

"Meet my parents," she said. "Judge and Miss Rosa. You know."

No, I didn't know. I'd only heard about them through guys I'd rodeoed with who called time to time to see if I was still able to stand and take nourishment. Lucy would be passing close to Plainston in an hour, she said. If I'd like to meet at the Squaw Creek truck stop, I was welcome to follow from there.

"To meet the family?" I said. "Meet the family as in — ?"

"As in to meet them," she said, coy. "What's complicated about that?"

The answer to that question --- her tone told me --- would only become clear if I went.

Meet the family? What sadistic game of tease, I asked myself, had camped in that girl's can-chasing brain? Hadn't she teased me along at Ft. Smith then vanished without a kiss-my-ass? Meet the parents? What *could* she want from me? Had her real date canceled? Or was I part of a psychological experiment she intended to co-publish with Limp Dick? If torturing a poor boy's psyche was all she craved, wouldn't she rather spike my nuts to a log, douse it with diesel, set it ablaze, and hand me a dull knife? Should I offer that as substitute? Oughtn't that be fun enough for one Sunday afternoon?

"It's not a formal thing," she said. "Just thought you might get a kick out of seeing the other fork of the gnarled Barnes family tree."

A kick? A kick in the ass, most likely. May lightning ignite your fricking family fork, I thought, and leave only ashes. I could feel my lips shaping *Go To Hell, Spoiled Rich Girl*. But, as the machinery of doom doth turn, a flashback to the Ft. Smith shower scene doused my flaming resistance.

"Five-thirty?" I said.

"That'll work," she said.

It did. My life had come to a truck stop hookup. Wordlessly, she smiled, waved, and pulled out when I circled Flatlander across the crowded parking lot. From there I tailgated her rig down that interstate through roaring traffic wondering what unspoken promise was next to be broken. She had, after all, left Ft. Smith without goodbye then ignored my humble existence all summer. Yet as I relived every line of dialogue ---they'd been few enough I could --- I admitted that she'd promised nothing. Ever. So why did I feel so deceived? For months afterward, as the world around us bobbed and reeled like drunken merry-go-round ponies, that question and its answer roamed in that hazy part of my mind where feelings never quite pair-up with words.

Months later it was Coldwell who found the words. Or, as he'd argue, the words found him. He was four deep into the filming by then. And each day's work etched a new wrinkle in his boyish face, each restless night a new gray strand in his fair hair. Like me, he'd been troubling himself over Lucy's real character as he plotted. That day, he allowed a morning ride

might clear his thinking, so Charlie sent me to nurse-maid him for a little sunrise jaunt in the pastures. It was one of those cool dreamy spring mornings when it seems the earth itself is pregnant. The sun cleared the eastern tree line just as we rode into a bluestem and wildflower hay meadow so full in bloom it could make a man forget yesterday and dread tomorrow. The misted air in new light glowed soft as moonbeams. As if he'd been taken by a pain, Coldwell clawed at his chest and yanked out the tiny tape recorder that he carried in his heart pocket like a Bible.

“Director’s note: Lucy Barnes is the promise,” he said, breathless as if he’d fired his wad. He clicked off his recorder and re-pocketed it. “Is. Is. Is. The great ‘I Isness.’” He pumped his fist.

“Of what?” I said.

“Why, America,” he said, still gasping, his hands grabbing at imaginary butterflies. “Heaven. Nirvana. The Holy Happily-Ever-After.”

I allowed to myself that Coldwell was, as Charlie regularly worded it, full of shit as a Christmas goose. But he believed what he believed with an enthusiastic, feverish conviction as contagious as flu. He’d been blessed with the gift of making people want to believe, no matter the reality, that what he offered as truth was truth. And as we rode back that morning, the two of us seeing in Lucy two totally different promises, I knew I’d never seen a man so ecstatic — or so scared. His conflicting feelings toward Lucy, though I wouldn’t witness them until months later, were the same ones I felt the day I followed her to meet the family.

A few miles north of K.C. Miss Holy Happily-Ever-After turned off one packed interstate onto another one less crowded for a few miles. From it we exited onto a narrow but newly surfaced blacktop. The snaky two-lane unrolled north through a sea of heat waves between miles of white fiberglass fencing around weedless pastures way too pretty for grazing. They’d been sown and groomed for pretty. The rolling farm country was being subdivided, bulldozed and rebuilt into manors and estates. The spires of mansions and mini-mansions jutted above groves of oak and hickory, lording over shrinking pastures and homey little three-bedroom jobs born of the sixties and now awaiting their date with a bulldozer.

At the tall stone entrance to the grandest mansion on the highest hill, Lucy's trailer brake lights flared. Black ornamental gates flowed open as if by magic, and she entered what Coldwell might've dubbed The Home of Promise. But before I could follow, the gates flowed closed. My phone rang.

"If you don't mind," Lucy said, "come ride up with me." The flowing gates stopped flowing with just space enough for me to walk between them.

"Flatlander be okay down here?" I teased. "My Merle Haggard eight tracks and all —."

She hung up. As I walked to her truck, Lucy opened her driver's window and watched me in her side mirror. The magic gates had flowed tightly closed by time I stepped into her truck. She punched the diesel into motion.

"Who is it I'm pretendin' to be?" I said. I soaked up the a.c. and stole sideways peeks at those lean brown legs in boots and the tender tanned belly folds that spanned the gap between sports bra and cutoffs. She'd dressed for effect, and it affected me.

"Say it," she said.

"That outfit looks more Rodeo Drive than Drive Home from Rodeo."

"That a complaint? Drooling is optional, you know."

"No complaint," I said. "You're as easy on the eyes as Visine, Miss Lucy. I'm curious how your folks will like your outfit, is all."

"Won't matter," she said.

That mean Cummins diesel leaned into the climb. Her horses shifted in the trailer. Tippy, braced on her haunches, gave me her glassy-eyed glare from the back seat.

"Am I to be the boyfriend?" I said. "Fiancé? Not Limp Dick, I hope."

"You're Uncle Charlie's apprentice," she said. "Who could want more?"

"Still aint found a new squeeze?" I said.

"Sure?" she said. She smiled her Mona Lisa smile.

She kept checking her mirrors for trailer clearance around red granite boulders that must've been some dozer operator's idea of roadside landscaping.

“Somebody’s birthday?” I said.

“Bound to be,” she said, cold as a snowflake. “Somebody born every day. This is driving you nuts, isn’t it?”

“I’d like to know why I’m here.”

“Ask yourself,” she said. She let that settle, then added, “To thine own bad self —.” And there was that smile again. And in it, Promise. Finally the switchbacks leveled onto the spine of a long grassy ridge. Far below, maybe three miles distant, the Missouri River arced its way south, swirling in and out of sight behind heavy green timber outside the levee. Inside the levee, quarter-section fields of corn and wheat and soybeans formed a checkerboard in shades of green and gold that stretched bend to bend before vanishing. Farther west, timbered Kansas bluffs spilled from low, heavy cloud banks like an endless green waterfall.

“Too bad they couldn’t afford someplace with a view,” I said.

“Judge always campaigned as a man of vision,” she said.

If so, his vision must’ve been limited to the breathtaking. On the other three sides of his fortress he’d sealed himself in behind rows of blue spruce and Norwegian fir thick enough to trap bats. So it wasn’t until we’d cleared the last turn that I really saw the place. Circling the inlaid asphalt drive like covered wagons, cashy cars were jammed bumper tight — silver Mercedes to red Lexus to white Porsche to blue Caddy — thirty or more sparkling as if each ray of sun had come to earth just for them.

Four garage doors flanked one end of the three-story castle, and another four-car garage sat fifty yards to the west. To the left of the house glimmered a pool where dozens of people shrieked and splashed, barely noticing us. To the right lay the tennis court. A big, paunchy, shirtless dude of fifty-something who waved as we passed was lobbing the ball to a legged-up redhead about Lucy’s age. The dude’s big old curved face resembled Charlie’s so much he had to be kin. Lucy parked, rested her arms on the steering wheel, and stared at the tennis players.

“Dad and Sis?” I said.

“Dad,” she said, sighing, “and whore du jour. I’m an only child. Living, that is.”

I absorbed what she'd said and faked a mobster accent.

"Ya want dat I should snuff 'im," I said.

"Let his liver do it," she said. "It has more motive. And it'll be slower, more painful."

We spent a tense silence in the idling truck while the swimmers kept swimming and the players kept playing and Lucy, her eyes simmering behind her dark shades, seemed to be scripting the next scene. Then she took off her glasses, flipped down the visor mirror, freshened her makeup, and snapped her purse closed.

"Party time," she said. She killed the engine and stepped out, Topsy trotting behind as Lucy stormed the tennis court, her spurs tink-tinking ridiculously on asphalt laid for loafers. I followed the dog, sure enough feeling that Lucy'd written me into her little scene as bodyguard. The players met us at the gate, the big paunchy man in the white sweat band wobbling as he walked. He peered at Lucy's outfit.

"You certainly undressed for the occasion," he said to Lucy. His slur matched his wobble and the lame joke he jabbed: "Your Victoria's has few secrets, I'm afraid."

When he turned to me, I offered my hand.

"Judge Barnes," Lucy said, "this is Chance Hendrix."

Judge stared drunkenly and gripped my hand as if to balance himself.

"May I?" he said, raising a thick finger to my nose. Squinting, he zig-zagged his finger the length of my scar and slugged my shoulder.

"You know what they say about lightning," he said. "Lucinda maintains you're quite the stoic, Big Thump." He said my nickname with the whiskey-breath glee of a kid saying "bullshit" for the first time and slugged my shoulder again, harder.

"Aren't you going to introduce your . . . player?" Lucy said. Judge turned, startled, as if he'd forgotten anyone was there. The pretty redhead in the white tennis skirt stepped forward, her tanned and manicured hand outstretched on a buff, freckled arm. Lucy ignored the girl's offer.

"I'm Matilda," the dudess said, sounding not quite sure. "Tillie to my friends."

“Matilda it is,” Lucy said. “I’m Lucy to my friends. You may call me Lucinda, please.”

Judge scowled. He wobbled. He seemed to be thinking mean things. Then he pounced.

“Lucinda Please it is,” he said sarcastically. Without warning, and far faster than I’d thought he could move, he spun Lucy by the shoulders and snatched her off the ground, her boots pedaling sky, in a bear hug chanting, “Lucinda Please, Lucinda Please. Lucinda pouted when Daddy took her keys. If she doesn’t behave he’ll bend her across his knees for all the world and Miss Rosa to see.” He turned a complete circle marching in place like a windup drummer boy.

The dude could rap, but Lucy could slap. So all the while he’s chanting and she’s thrashing, he has to strain harder and harder to keep her arms pinned and dodge her head butts. The pool crowd drifted against the low white fiberglass fence to watch, so he stepped into a pained smile and happy tone as if he knew of no way to greet kin other than humiliation and a public mauling.

“She has this fantasy that all my friendships with the fairer sex are adulterous.” The cruel way his lips made words reminded me of a line I’d once read: A smile is just the polite way of baring one’s teeth. Lucy, her belly rubbed red, seemed as at home in that sad circus as a peanut.

“Having a good time?” she seethed at the pool crowd, her nails drawing blood from Judge’s biceps. “More fun than a fucking sack race, huh?”

She wasn’t weakening. She slung her head and slashed sky with her spurs. Apparently she’d inherited her daddy’s temper.

“Play time over?” I said, ready to end it. Topsy dropped to her belly, teeth snapping, but held tight when Lucy spoke to her. By then Lucy had squirmed almost free, so Judge grabbed her wrists and reared back if he meant to swing her in circles by both hands, boots to the breeze. He might have done it if she hadn’t hooked a spur into the meatiest bulge of his left calf. When he howled, the frothing Topsy dove for his ankles, scattering shreds of red-flecked socks and pasty-skinned flesh over the pretty grass.

“You goddamn bitch!” he yelled, “You dirty hateful goddamn bitch!” And no one knew

which of them he meant. Tangled as a burred mane, Lucy, Judge, and Topsy were set to topple in a heap, so I grabbed for his belt to soften his fall. Judge, as such disasters go, thought I'd gut-punched him. Apparently so did three of his bolder pool pals, who rushed me in a pack. Without punching anybody, I heaved one left, one right, and snatched the other in a headlock. Lucy gained her feet and pried Topsy's teeth from the thigh of the squirming guy I'd headlocked. I let go, and something close to calm came upon us all.

"Daddy, oh Daddy" Lucy said, kneeling and suddenly tender to Judge. He propped himself upright on the grass, leaning back on his hands, his hairy paunch heaving. Tillie Matilda had dissolved into the pool crowd. The guys who'd charged mulled around me muttering threats until Judge shushed them back toward their pals.

"Why must you drink so?" Lucy scolded Judge. She dabbed at his bloody ankles with his sweaty head band, which filled his raw dog bites with salt.

"Goddamn that burns," Judge said, slapping at the bloody sweat band. "Let it bleed, goddamn it." Then, seeing Lucy's face, he added sheepishly, "You know I meant the dog, don't you? I'd never call you a bitch, even if you did act the part."

He tilted his head back and looked up at me. "You sure do pack a wallop. Whop! Whop! Whop!" He punched sky.

"Never doubled a fist," I said, which was true. "Just sat 'em down a little rough."

"Mind reversing the process?" he said, wanting help up. "Gravity's gained weight, it seems." He raised his hand for me to lift him, which I did. His embarrassed guests were walking toward the circled caravan of cashy cars, dressing as they walked, calling out hasty goodbyes and gratitude from a distance. Ponying him between us, Lucy and I walked Judge to the vacated pool house and left him to shower.

"No more today," Lucy scolded him.

"Tell your mother I'll join you later," he said. He rolled his sunburned shoulders and grimaced. "Someone may need to spoon feed me my dinner."

"The story of his life," Lucy said as we left him. That someone, she explained as we

entered the bright, chilled mansion, was her mother, Miss Rosa.

“The Barnes blood in me is pure red baked Oklahoma clay,” Lucy said. “But the Fairchild blood flows from high-grade black Texas crude.” At fifty-three years old Miss Rosa had, Lucy told me, outlived all other heirs of the Fairchild oil fortune, making the millions all hers. And Judge’s idea of equal partners was that he’d balance the books by spending all the money the oil earned.

“If only — ” Lucy said.

“If only what?”

“You’ll see,” she said cryptically. “Not everyone does. But you will. Not everyone does.”

“Does what?”

“Sees. But you will.”

“I will?”

“Oh, yes. You will.”

And I knew the futility of asking more. Inside, she led me over carpets deep as clouds and hollow-sounding rooms bigger than some arenas I’d bulldogged in. But that mansion, for all its splendor, felt hollow and cold as a cave.

“All this for two people?” I said.

“Judge populates it with . . . guests,” she said. “Plus, they keep four servants. Must’ve given them a rare Sunday off.”

She led me into a great room of high walls lined with dead animal heads and old-time pictures of stern men and somber women with sad faces three feet tall.

“You think that’s the happiest they ever felt?” I said.

“Who needed happy?” she said. “They were rich.”

“And someday all this will — ”

“Not if I’m lucky,” she said. “You’ve no idea what a burden wealth is.”

“Maybe not,” I said, “but I can tell you to the ounce what poverty weighs.”

Lucy leaned against my chest, hugged my waist, and raised her mouth as if she intended

for me to kiss it. But when I tried, she ducked and strutted away, giggling, her spurs tink-tinking on the cold tile floor, those cute white crescents jiggling below the frayed jean threads.

“I’m way too sweaty for that,” she said over her shoulder. Her voice echoed in that cold, hollow room. “Besides, it’s time you met Miss Rosa.”

“A house this cashy surely has showers,” I said.

She ignored me. We scaled a wide spiral walnut staircase lined with a polished hand rail that must’ve left a thousand squirrels hungry and homeless when the logs were cut. At the top of the staircase was a hardwood balcony with a mural-sized window that faced the river, and off the balcony was a hallway that led to heavy, matching doors, both closed. From inside the room came a woman’s voice, only one voice, which seemed to be reading aloud. I thought a few of the lines familiar — King Lear? When I started to ask, Lucy shushed me with a finger to her lips.

“The library,” she whispered. “Judge lives for lechery, Mother for literature.”

“And who for Lucy?”

“Lucy,” she said. “Who needs anybody else?”

She tapped lightly on the door then opened it and motioned me to follow into the cold library, which was too dark.

“Tell your momma it’s not good on her eyes to read in the dark,” I whispered.

“Won’t hurt her any,” Lucy said.

“Lucinda?” A woman’s voice echoed across the hollow room. When my eyes adjusted, I made out somebody standing backlit by the lone window, its sunlight mostly blocked behind a thick white drawn drape. Rows of books lined shelf upon built-in shelf along every wall. But except for the desk and two high-backed chairs near the window, the room was as hollow as it sounded.

Her back still to us, Miss Rosa stood as tall and angular as one of her oil derricks, an elegant old gal with long white hair that flowed onto an even whiter evening gown. But who, I asked myself, would wear a white evening gown in a dark library? She sure enough wasn’t part of the pool-and-tennis scene. There was something creepy about the whole deal, as if she were

looking through the closed blind and all the way to the Pacific. And as odd as this may sound the woman owned an aura of — what’s the word? — majesty. As we crossed the room, I battled a twitch to kneel.

“How are you, Mother?” Lucy said. Lucy walked around the desk, threw back the thick white drape, and kissed Miss Rosa’s face, which I still hadn’t seen. Miss Rosa turned her head slightly and inhaled as if checking Lucy’s perfume.

“Is this the young Mister Hendrix?” Miss Rosa asked. Her voice came warm, gentle, full of wealth and pedigree. Given the impression I’d made on the others, I wanted to say something kind and maybe pretty, mostly because I allowed Lucy expected it. Not much given to poetry, I couldn’t think of anything prettier than the sunset on the distant Kansas bluffs.

“I sure enough do envy your view of the world, Mrs. Barnes,” I said.

“You don’t,” she said sternly. “Surely Lucinda — ”

And then she turned. And when she turned, I stared slack-jawed into the far-away eyes of a blind woman. And in one of those moments of clarity I understood that the voice we’d heard reading belonged to a Books on Tape cassette, one of the thousands that I’d mistaken for books on the shelves.

“He didn’t know, Mother,” Lucy said.

And why was that? I fumed silently. Because somebody didn’t bother to tell me. Why oh why did Miss Lucy Break-Your-Heart Barnes so love torturing me? And, worse, why oh why did I?

“Open mouth, insert foot,” I said. “You’d think by now I’d have learned to like boot sole, Mrs. Barnes. I’m very very sorry, ma’am.”

“I’m certain you are,” Miss Rosa said, fixing a formal smile as I shook her cold, bony hand.

She wasn’t a pretty sight, I have to say. I could almost sympathize with Judge. The old girl, majesty and money aside, had turned as yellow and parched as the Dead Sea Scrolls. At fifty-three — I swear this by all the Arena Gods hold holy — she could’ve passed for the goat

woman Edy Kittner's great grandmother. Yet she was a proper lady.

"You'll be dining with us this evening, Chance. Certainly you must."

"We can't stay," Lucy said. "Besides, your chef's off today, Mother. Remember?"

"It's my sight I've lost, Lucinda, not my memory. Go tell your father he'll be grilling. Spare ribs, please. A rib, the source of Eve, yes? And if the ancient Jewish scholars are to be believed — who but a lunatic would question them, after all? — Adam's rib begat Eve, who begat all evil. How neatly told, if one is a man seeking to assign blame. Either way, your father the Honorable Judge always has a store of fresh meat, it seems, awaiting the kiss of a flame. Surely he has a spare rib."

So mad I dreaded what I might say, I apologized again and politely excused myself to help Lucy tend her horses. But all the way out of that hollow-gutted hull of a madhouse I said not another word, giving Lucy air enough to offer. And when she'd offered not so much as a kiss-my-ass by the time we reached the pool house, I kept inside my quiet. I said nothing while she relayed a paraphrased version of Miss Rosa's razor-tongued request to the showered and sobering Judge. But as soon as we crossed the driveway, I spit out the bit.

"You're the seventh shade of evil," I said. "You know that about your self-centered self-absorbed self-gratifying self-deceived selfish self? You know that?"

For a moment Lucy walked on as if she'd pressed my mute button. She opened the trailer gates and unloaded the horses, handing me lead shanks, and not until we'd tied the horses to the trailer did she face up and answer.

"We weren't always this way," she said. "No one was before — ."

Her face drew itself taut as a cinch. Her eyes fluttered wild as pigeons from a burning barn. She threw up her arms, made fists, lowered her arms, and slung them again into sky. She pranced tight little circles as if she'd been picketed to a stake. Like a spinning top, she'd become all crazy motion going everywhere and nowhere all at once. Lucy looked to be — as Coldwell might've worded it — pain itself. Frantic, she grabbed my hands, looked into me with empty eyes, and gasped. That's all she could do, gasp, as if she'd just surfaced from a deep dive into

dark waters. Stare wild-eyed at me and gasp. But the pain in that gasp warned me that some mighty rank water was about to spill from a deep, dark well she'd meant to cap. When she moved her lips, no words came. Lockjaw victims could not have struggled more painfully to make words. Her trembling jaw sawed at air that would only hiss. I caught her hands.

“It’s okay,” I said. But I already knew that whatever it was would never be okay.

Still she couldn’t talk when I freed her hands. She could only stand there, her upturned palms opening and closing, tugging on sky as if it were a blind to be lowered or raised while her jaw sawed off inhuman sounds of pain that she couldn’t find words big enough to pack. Minutes later, when she finally gathered herself enough to speak, she asked, humble as a nun, would I mind bringing her a curry comb, please, if it wouldn’t be too much bother. After I’d pried open her shaking fist and folded her fingers around the red wooden handle, she moved like a sleepwalker to her sorrel barrel horse, Pancho, knelt, and started currying his copper coat from the hooves up. Only then, when she’d tricked her mind by busying her body, did she find the words.

So in snippets and sobs, while Lucy curried her horses, came the tale of her younger brother’s death in a truck wreck nine years before. He was fifteen. She was sixteen. They were coming back from Charlie’s after a few days of practicing with him before the High School National Finals. She was driving in heavy rain, too fast, too novice with the new rig Judge had bought them. On a slick curve north of Coffeyville, Kansas, she’d ditched the rig, killing two horses and her brother. Everybody else — Judge, Miss Rosa, Charlie — blamed everybody else. But Lucy blamed only herself. Every day. Sick of the constant bickering, she eventually moved in with Charlie after graduating high school. By then Judge had plunged into bottles and beds. Miss Rosa, unable to witness the reality of her family’s ruin, went blind and spent her days listening to fiction. Hysterical blindness, Lucy called it, a somatoform disorder, psychological not physiological. Miss Rosa’s eyes, specialists all agreed, would see fine if her mind would let them. And everybody suspected that her blindness came and went, though she never owned seeing. As for Lucy, she’d stayed in therapy until she moved to Charlie’s. Since then he’d been

her counselor and — though she didn't admit this — her daddy.

“Uncle Charlie prescribed a four-step program,” she said. “Own who you are. Own your deeds. Forgive yourself. Live.”

“How many you mastered?” I said.

“The third one's tricky. But I own who I am. And what I did. I'm okay now,” she said. “Though I've been told I may harbor lingering intimacy issues.”

“By Limp Dick?”

“What you're really wondering,” she said, “is why I sucked you into my mire. Be honest.”

I shrugged. I pitied her for the weight of her sorrow, her may-as-well-be-dead parents, her for-real dead brother. In all that wealth, that grand appearance of happiness and success, I'd seen more raging grief in one afternoon than I'd known in my entire lifetime with my empty-pocket parents. These people were broken souls strapping gold-plated splints on breaks that wouldn't mend. The whole scene took on a ghostly ugliness. When Lucy climbed the ladder to the hay rack atop her rig, I didn't even watch her butt going up or coming down. The smell of Judge's barbecued ribs made me almost puke. The sunset smudged into a bloodstain on the sky.

“Don't you wonder,” she asked, “why I invited you here? Why you came?”

She laughed a sad little laugh, a scoff, and once more choked back what she'd been choking back for nine years and would, I allowed, likely choke back forever. I wondered if it might not be better to cry that stagnant tear well dry, but I sure enough wasn't going to be first to snatch the handle.

“Will you hold me?” she said. “Wrap your arms around me and say nothing?”

Facing the blood-stained sky, she pressed her back to my chest, put her hands in mine and folded my arms around her. The horses stamped at flies and chomped their sweet feed. A cool breeze came up the bluffs from the river bottoms. The sound of horses chewing and the rich heavy smell of molasses brought me the only peace I'd felt in hours. I hoped Lucy felt it, too.

“His name was Evan,” she said. “It happened on his birthday. Nine years. Today.”

She shuddered, steadied herself, and shuddered again.

“Promise me something?” she said.

“Not without hearin’ it.”

“Promise you will never love me, Chance Jacob Hendrix. Not just that you won’t say it. Promise that you won’t do it, ever. If you’ll promise that, you can have me any way you like. Will you promise?”

“Not just now,” I said.

“It’s every cowboy’s fantasy,” she said. She tried to sound bold. “Pure fling, no strings.”

I didn’t know any more what I could or couldn’t do. I didn’t know what I felt for a girl I didn’t know. Shameful as this shows me to be, the newness of her sobbed-out body soft against my chest made me crave her. I ached to shred her clothes and pin her knees to her ears and suck her jugular until she whimpered and shuddered and lay spent and still beneath me. But it was so wrong I made myself stop. I thought back to my ex-sweet little rich girl whose love had been so pure and uncomplicated. I thought I should’ve called her that night in Ft. Smith and never opened the gates to this moment, this place. I allowed that Lucinda Rose Barnes would be lethal as a soft-nosed bullet if she got into a man’s heart. I wasn’t promising her anything about love, not then, not ever. But after what seemed a proper silence, I turned her around, cupped her chin, and gave her a tender little kiss.

“I promise,” I whispered. And then I wondered how it was that the last thing a man understands is himself. When Judge yelled from the driveway to come eat, I told Lucy I lacked an appetite. I told her that maybe time to themselves would be best. She held me but didn’t protest. With night closing, I eased from her arms and started through the long shadows toward Flatlander, hungry most of all for the throbbing rhythm of the road.

Chapter Eleven

Coldwell's mad vision of Reality first struck Charlie's arena in late September, the third week of my apprenticeship. What I know about him now, I was almost a year learning. Like most of us who passed through Charlie's barn outside Checotah, Coldwell had what he called "lofty aspirations." I didn't tell him that mine had led me to live in one. His life's goal, we learned soon enough, was to write and direct big-budget films "so passionate, prophetic, and profound that skulls will weep." Some unnamed Tinseltown insider had convinced him that the surest way to open the big-budget doors was to film a low-budget documentary that critics could pan so fans could rave. He needed a subject. That would be us. The cute little dude talked in wild-eyed, arm-waving, spit-slinging bursts of words he revised mid-tongue, his mad vision raising our hopes like a tent pole.

"You're not mere cowboys," he told us the day he pitched his idea. That came almost three months after his first visit.

"We're not?"

"You are Lore's latest love children. You are Mythology's newest Adonis. You are antithesis to Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis."

"We are?"

"And more! You are the Great American icon of icons. You ride — no! no! gallop or no! no! spur, yes! spur — across the archetypal prairies of the American imagination, as timeless as sex. Or God. Stories as glorious as yours," he promised, "are sold before they're told!"

He rambled with such cadence and conviction that I caught myself wanting to close his holy rants with an "Amen." Lucy allowed he suffered from a Messiah complex. Or a Napoleonic Complex. Or sometimes an unresolved Oedipal Complex. She was sure he was sick.

But it wasn't the film idea that first got him inside Charlie's pen. No, the Trojan Horse he first rode in on trotted atop the telescoping legs of a plain digital camera's tripod. As day jobs go — if it's accurate to call what he did a day job — Coldwell had a pretty good one compared to, say, digging post holes and mucking stalls. He was a one-man enterprise, a word-hurling,

shutter-snapping free-lance photographer. Right after graduating college he'd founded Icon N Images, LLC. He'd started by shooting weddings and graduation photos then advanced to pricey portraits of "ego-bloated rich men and their atrophied trophy wives," as he worded it. Success in photography, Coldwell told me, comes not from making the photo an image of the subject, but of making the photo an image of the image the subject *wishes* to be.

"I'd become an illusionist," he said, "digitally transforming blemishes into beauty marks, whoring my art."

And when he owned that he'd become a whore, he decided he was pimping himself too cheaply in brothels that had come to bore him. So he'd spent a year with a pack of globe-roaming paparazzi, turning the beautiful ugly for greater profit. By selling images lifted from the lives of the famously defamed he'd gained street cred with major agencies. And one of his newest connections led him to Charlie's barn. And us.

"Like begets like," he said. "Fame creates fame."

What he meant was that he hoped to siphon some of Lance and Shannon's fame into the fumey little tank that fueled the engine of his ego. In the Steer Wrestling Rookie of the Year race, Lance had gapped his nearest threat, Spade, by over eight grand with only three months to go before the NFR in Vegas. And the CD Shannon had released before Easter, *God's Forgotten Daughter*, was rocketing toward Platinum. Its controversial cover featured Shannon, naked but for a loin cloth, being crucified on a stony outcropping, her back to the camera, her shoulders draped in golden tresses. Fake blood trickled from a cat-o-nine tails dangling menacingly above her back. Her face was profiled from the side against the backdrop of a merciless sky as she stared longingly toward Heaven. All the talk shows had been calling. The CD's furor had turned Coldwell on to Shannon's dual lives as recording artist and WPRA barrel racer. Through her publicity, he'd learned of Lance. And after reading the *People* magazine article titled "Cowboy Camelot," Coldwell had become obsessed with the notion of a rodeo documentary. But he needed an in. Lance and Shannon had contracted with Wrangler for their 20X jean marketing blitz, and somehow Coldwell snared the photo spread assignment.

Not that the shoot had to bring Coldwell to Charlie's pen, not at all. It could've been done on a Hollywood set or behind the chutes at any rodeo. Truth was, scouting a place less picturesque than Charlie's would've been one fierce chore. Instead, the shoot brought Coldwell to Charlie's because — ironically — Lance meant to help Charlie by throwing him a hefty per diem facility usage fee. Wrangler's people agreed, pending Coldwell's okay. But Charlie's place was too sorry for anybody to okay. That meant some barnyard surgeon skilled with pitchfork and paint brush would have to perform an emergency facelift on the faded, sagging facilities. Since I was the only one not rodeoing, though I'd yet to unpack my first change of clothes, Charlie called me from a highway west of Laramie to tell me of Coldwell's upcoming inspection. That was how I learned of Coldwell. It was only my second night there. Charlie and I had seldom talked all summer, and then mainly to expand my chore list before I'd even moved to his barn. Tired as a barber's jokes, I was almost asleep when my phone rang.

“How's the 'commodations suit, Big Thump?” Charlie drawled.

The accommodations, what Charlie called the “partments,” had been carved by some wood butcher from a windowless, second-story hay loft partitioned with warped cottonwood studs, cheap paneling, and tacky tile ceilings against a tin roof hot enough to make spit sizzle. Somebody had sledge-hammered rickety air-conditioners into a wall adjoining a wide hall that functioned like a breeze way, so at least the nights cooled enough to let me sleep. In all, there were two shared bathrooms and ten total 'partments, five down each side of the hallway that ended under a ventilator fan with the blade span of a Cessna. Though that big old fan sure enough cooled things, it screeched like breeding owls in the pounding din of that barn. On a quiet night, once darkness grounded the fly hordes, the horses stopped banging feed buckets and pawing just often enough to create a chronic insomniac. And since the 'partments were built smack over stalls, they smelled of prairie hay, sweet feed —which was great — and horse shit floating on the ammonia reek of uric acid, which was not so much. How's the 'commodations? he asked.

“Like a resort,” I said, but I was thinking, last fricking resort. His comeback said he'd

caught my meaning.

“No skin offen my ass if’n ya’d rather camp in yore truck,” he said. “I spent good money seein’ to yore comfort”

Though Charlie could be stingy as Scrooge when it came to details, I pried out that Wrangler had ponied up a \$2,500 per diem pen rent, up to three days, plus \$300 daily for me as Go-for.

“I can sure enough use it,” I said.

“Well, see, Big Thump, about that — ” I pictured him winking at the guys in his rig. He likely had his phone on Speaker. “Me havin’ to pay lectricity and inshorance and all, that fee rightly belongs to the barn.”

“The barn belongs to you.”

“And the bank.”

“Maybe they’ll send out a teller to clean the place,” I said. “One who’s handy with a brush cutter and post-hole jabbers.”

I swore I heard guys laughing.

“How much of a cut are ya thinkin’?” Charlie said, somber as an embalmer.

“How much of the work you expect me to do?” I said. He’d ordered Elena to fire Eddie and Freddie the day before I got there, so “All of it,” was what I’d have to do. And what he wouldn’t admit.

“Damn,” Charlie said. “I caint do better than 50/50, with the lectricity and inshorance and all. Water. Tractor gas. I got ‘xpences, Big Thump.”

“More than \$2,500 a day?” I said.

I played to his pity, arguing how many extra hours it’d take me to pretty the place before Coldwell even agreed to shoot there. And Charlie knew that if I didn’t pretty it, not even Lance’s clout could save the deal. We settled on a \$250/\$50 daily split, the bigger being mine. I almost felt bad, until I later heard from Coldwell that they’d budgeted me in at \$500 a day from the start. Charlie Barnes — as if I’d needed to be reminded — was coyote to the core.

On the nippy September morning Coldwell came, I was working a cold-spined, three-year-old grulla stud in the round pen east of the gravel lane. Each loop I loped the colt let me admire the facelift I'd given the old place. I was anxious for Charlie to roll in and see the mowed pastures, re-hung gates, tightened wires, replaced panes, and painted boards that sparkled white even under cloud cover. I wanted him to be proud.

In the distance, at the end of the lane where the caved-in cattle guard marked the end of Charlie's twenty acres, a slick black Lexus SUV screeched past the mailbox, reversed, and turned off the blacktop and into the lane. It inched across the rickety cattle guard, still two-hundred yards away, and crept up the lane like a turtle straddling the deep gravel ruts and potholes until finally stopping ten strides from the round pen. I'd swung down to offer greetings.

A burly, bald dude in khakis, a hoodie and dark shades came around the vehicle from the driver's side. Without so much as a howdy-do he lumbered to the tall board fence, squared his legs, and took a whiz. Though Elena the cook had gone to town, the guy didn't even glance to see if women might be close. His name, I'd soon be told, was Ted. He was Coldwell's associate, whose last name they always muttered so fast that we just called him Ted S.O. which came out as Tedso, short for Ted Somethingorother.

When I led the colt out, Coldwell stepped from the passenger's door, tucking into his shirt pocket the tiny tape recorder I mistook for his phone. He filled a lot less sky than I'd expected. It always struck me odd that a man with such a big job and ideas could be so small of body, like some proud daddy's fair-haired ten-year-old trying on the Old Man's clothes. He had a high nasal voice that broke as if he were middle-schooler with a sinus infection. Actor that he was, Coldwell had come in character. It was as if he'd contacted Wardrobe, and Wardrobe had dressed him in denim Wrangler jacket, jeans, and shirt so fresh from the rack they may as well have kept their price tags. His gunslinger Stetson and Double H boots pinched him head and foot. If he'd not been so animated, I'd have felt as if I'd met my first talking mannequin.

"Mister Hendrix?" Coldwell asked. He hustled forward, grinning a car salesman's grin,

and offering his hand. His grip was girlish, his hands small, soft as a lotion-loving secretary's, yet saddle brown. "Or do you prefer 'Big Thump?'"

"Chance's fine," I said. I hadn't come to prefer that anybody call me Big Thump.

"Great, great," Coldwell said. "Chance it is. Mister Barnes says you'll escort me about the premises. My card."

Wheeler-dealer that he was, he flashed me a flashy business card that eventually proved to be nearly all flash. It listed a New Orleans office (killed by Katrina), a web site, IB2morrow.com (always under construction) and his phone digits (which did actually work), along with all the name we ever knew: F. Justin Coldwell, esq. What F stood for I still don't know.

"Have you a card?" he said. He looked up at me from under the too big brim of his lid like a kid who'd just ask for a dollar to buy ice cream. And his little voice rose with each word like the notes of a hopeful song. Have. You. A. Card?

"Queen of diamonds," I said. I hadn't meant to say that. Or anything else. I just, odd as this sounds, couldn't bear to disappoint him by saying nothing. He had that effect on folks. Besides, he wore the lethal cologne of wealth and power and mystery that set me thinking of the rich girls who'd rumbled into and out of my life.

"Queen of hearts is always your best friend," Coldwell said. He smiled a knowing smile as if we'd shared an inside joke. "Desperado?"

"Sir?" I said. He started humming and strumming a mournful air guitar.

"Desperado," he said. "The Eagles song." He hummed again, then sang in his reedy little voice while he fretted his air guitar. His blue eyes sought connection.

Don't you fall for queen of diamonds boy.
She'll beat you when she's able.
The queen of hearts is always your best bet.
Now it seems to me some fine things
have been laid upon your table,
but you always want the ones that you can't get.
Desperado.

“You are he?” he said. “Aren’t you?” He spread the baggy sleeves of his new blue denim jacket as if he meant to hug the whole gray sky and drew in air like he meant to pop a lung. “The desperado of these open spaces?”

Open spaces? There it was. Without looking for it, I’d met Coldwell’s Grand Delusion. Charlie’s squished little twenty acres lay flanked by a puppy mill on the west, a trashy trailer court with reputed meth labs to the east, and an oil company’s tall greasy storage tanks to the south. The only open space left was the unfenced hay meadow across the blacktop to the north that had once been part of the Barnes ranch. And it had a huge For Sale, Will Divide sign stabbed right into its open bluestem heart. Even that overcast Oklahoma sky was cluttered with blinking cell phone towers. Yet Coldwell ignored the three sides of reality as if the only open space left, no matter that it too was as good as gone, was all that mattered to his vision.

“Just a song,” I said.

“Ted,” Coldwell called out, “Chance is the Real Desperado.”

“That song’s older than I am,” I said.

“Irrelevant,” he said. “You and it are timeless. Beyond time. Transcendent of any one space.”

He cupped his girlish little hands to his cheeks and like a horse with blinders stood staring at the distant bluestem meadow until it either satisfied or disappointed him enough he could face what he’d come to do. He lowered his blinders.

“May we begin our tour?” he said.

I led the grulla back into the round pen, Coldwell matching me step for step, studying my moves and the grulla’s. Tedso lumbered behind. Like the curious kid, Coldwell had to know everything, every detail and reason to my actions. When I bitted up the colt, why did I lace the reins through dee rings and dally them to the horn? To soften the colt’s mouth and set his head. Why had I been loping the colt in the round pen? To get sharper lead changes. What were lead changes? Whether a horse leads with his left or right hooves. What was the leather thing tying

the colt's mouth closed? A cavesson. Its purpose? A closed mouth gives the bit more power. Why did I wear spurs? To cue for gait and lead changes. And so on and on and on as we walked the pens. He studied each steer, each calf, each horse, each plank and pipe. Inside the arena he scrutinized the living quarters, the feed and tack — Do bell boots ring? No, they're called that because of how they're shaped to protect horses' shin bones — and, finally, the lighting, artificial and natural, in both the outdoor and indoor arenas. He was intrigued with the plastic sky panels, said he'd never seen them in gold.

“Charlie's doin',” I said. I knew that from his videos. Charlie hadn't been home since I'd come. “When you bulldog, you land on your back with a steer's head on top of you. Charlie allows that he wants every gunner to see gold at the end of every run. As in a winner's buckle.”

“Brilliant!” Coldwell said. He turned to Tedso. “Isn't that brilliant?”

“There's only so many colors,” I said. “It's not like a man wantin' to let in light would pick brown.”

“But why not blue? Red? Orange?” Coldwell said, his voice breaking. “You're devaluing the psychological potency of the symbolic, Chance.”

I felt like I was back in college listening to some pompous prof. He asked me to wait with Tedso near the chutes while he stepped off the arena's width (120 feet) and length (365 feet) then stood at what he'd determined to be its precise center. He knelt, cupped a handful of sand, and heaved it toward the rafters, letting it powder his new clothes like a kid might do.

“Exquisite!” he yelled. His nasal voice almost whinnied. “Absolutely exquisite! I hadn't dreamt natural light inside a barn could be this golden.”

“Don't take much to entertain some guys,” I mumbled to Tedso. He hadn't removed his dark glasses, whatever that said.

“One must fly above the clouds if one wishes to see any distance,” Tedso said. He spoke in a croaking voice that seemed to come from the other side of me. What bald fat guy in a hoodie talks like that? I couldn't answer him. But it didn't matter because as if on cue Tedso walked toward the arena door to intercept Coldwell, who'd headed back to their vehicle. I trailed along,

content to let them talk low among themselves. At the Lexus, Coldwell turned and again offered his limp-wristed, soft-palmed handshake and boyish smile.

“I believed we’ve scheduled our shoot to begin Wednesday next,” he said. Tedso nodded. “You’ve been a most gracious host, Chance” he said, gripping my hand with both of his. “So generous with your knowledge. Please assure Mister Barnes we found the facilities enchanting. I’m so looking forward to working with Shannon and Lance. Such a blessed miracle couple. This promises to be a perfect event. Perfect. Perfect!”

It wouldn’t be. There’d be nothing perfect about it. But as is the case with most lies, Coldwell believed his to be true when he told it. I forced a smile and held it a long time. Then — after they’d gone out the drive toward that last open meadow and vanished on the blacktop that by evening would lie in the long shadow of that For Sale, Will Divide sign — I realized that I hadn’t forced the smile at all. The smile had come natural as the sun that’d parted the clouds while we were inside. Coldwell’s charm was his contagious enthusiasm. I untied the colt, cheeked him, and swung up. Clucking that cat-backed grulla colt into his right lead, I did want everything to be perfect for Coldwell, for all of us. He’d made me believe, if only for an instant, time could be turned forward or back and that life not only could be, but *should* be, perfect. For the moment, that didn’t seem too much to expect.

Chapter Twelve

Come Wednesday next — now early October — the imperfection on the whole plan had a name: Charles Barnes Wilkins, a fetus. Shannon the model was about two moons from being Shannon the mom. The butt-broadening baby boy was scheduled to bless Cowboy Camelot come January. For months now, Shannon explained, she'd masked her pregnancy from the public at Lance's request to avoid the kind of paparazzi Coldwell had been. She hadn't run barrels since before Ft. Smith, the lack of which she'd laid onto her CD tour. And she'd completed her concert tour on stage at a distance, shunning interviews, and had chosen her wardrobe to deceive. Now the belly swell that a sonogram confirmed to be Charles Barnes Wilkins demanded a public introduction.

Other than Shannon's and Lance's shushed families, we were first to know. Not even their agent knew. Nor did the Wrangler people. Nor, obviously, did Coldwell. He'd spent the Tuesday night before the scheduled shoot in a Tulsa Best Western so he could arrive before dawn with Tedso in a Ryder truck chockfull of equipment, makeup, hair-care products, and the whole 20X line of Wranglers clothes, women's and men's. The rental sat parked on the gravel lot outside Charlie's arena between Flatlander and Shannon's luxury tour bus.

The Pregnant Couple were due on Friday to hold a press conference they'd scheduled at her family's Nashville recording label, Third Corinthians. But Lance, loyal as a pup to Charlie, insisted they start this day with a sunrise breakfast announcement of the impending birth at Charlie's kitchen table. In something I can only describe as hormonal sympathy pains, the usually cool Lance seemed more volatile than Shannon. Prospective fatherhood was affecting him. The birth of his new life as a champion, he allowed with misted eyes, had happened not in the arena but at Charlie's table, over meals and coffee. It'd been during those reflective times before and after bulldogging that Charlie had changed his thinking about himself and rodeo. Lance babbled that he was Adam to Charlie's God.

"I feel like I was born on this table," Lance said. As if imagining where the

gynecologist's steel stirrups would've centered some pregnant woman's fertile valley atop that cluttered table, he slapped his hand and said, "right here," patting an old oil stain between the platters of scrambled eggs and French toast Elena had left.

That intimate announcement rightly ought to have belonged only to Lance, Shannon, and Charlie. But they'd gathered us all, Coldwell and Tedso included, in the dim, cramped kitchen of Charlie's swaybacked old three-bedroom, one-bath shotgun-style house. Elena, the poor graying work-and-worry-thin widowed Mexican cook, bustled silently about feeding and cleaning up after our little merry little band of mischief-makers. The rest of us sat squeezed round the old oak table that bore the greasy, scarred look of a mechanic's work bench because, well, it had been one. In place of the golden autumn sunrise Coldwell craved, a cold, slow rain trickled from the red leaves of the pecan tree outside the lone kitchen window.

Charlie had ceremoniously granted Lance the head of the table. Shannon rode sidesaddle on Lance's lap. Her arms, slightly fleshier, curled around the permanently pressed collar of Lance's starched checkered shirt. I'd long heard wives' tales claiming that if a woman carried her unborn high, it'd be a girl, or low, it'd be a boy. I'd not heard anybody say what to expect if she carried it in the cheeks of her butt, which seemed to be where baby Charles had made camp. A cute little 20X butt, Shannon no longer owned. At the end opposite sat Charlie, sipping coffee blacker than boot polish and brooding over his brood. To his left sat Lucy — who'd driven in the night before at Charlie's request — and beside her, straining to appear neutral in the complex politics of that table, sat I. To Lance's left Spade slouched with his black Nike cap brim shadowing his dark, hungover eyes. His dark face further darkened by stubble, he reeked of Brut and stale Jack that cheapened the rich aroma of Elena's coffee and sausage. Tedso and Coldwell completed the circle, little Coldwell wedged so low and tight between the tall bulk of Spade, Tedso and Charlie that I wished I could've thought of a kind way to elevate him with books or pillows. Lance tapped his spoon to his metal coffee cup and lifted the cup as if planning a toast.

"Mister Barnes, I want you to know it's an honor to name my — "

"*Our*, Honey," Shannon whispered too loud. She sent Lance that wifely look. He looked

at her as if she'd farted.

"Right, *our* son after you," Lance said. "Truly an honor, Mister Barnes."

Charlie's ruddy cheeks ruddied up a little more.

"Just hope the name aint a burden for the boy," Charlie said.

Coldwell — though he about had to be contemplating murder — had been sweet as Texas tea, congratulating the Pregnant Couple for what amounted to stomping his dream as if it were a Marlboro butt in a hay barn. But instead of anger his thin boyish face bore the happy mask of a whirring brain. I tried pretending I was him. I asked myself what would I do if people I'd schemed to capitalize on had stiffed me and kept it secret. And the slow, soaking rain had to be drowning his spirits, I knew, because there'd be none of his beloved golden light in Charlie's arena without sun. But then there again on his thin little boyish face surfaced that mad unsinkable optimism. He dabbed gingerly at his mouth with a napkin.

"Does Wrangler offer a maternity line?" he asked. He said it casual as if he'd asked somebody pass the scrambled eggs, please. Everybody stopped chewing, sipping, whatever they were doing. Lucy looked to Shannon who looked to Lance who looked to me and so forth until without a word we agreed nobody knew of one.

"No," Coldwell said, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin, "of course not." The light that glowed eternal as the Olympic flame in those boyish eyes flickered, dimmed, then flared again.

"Shannon, love," he said. "Would you be averse to — how shall I phrase this? — hmmm. May I offer an analogy?"

He was his fully animated self now, his girly fingers stirring the air between Tedso and Charlie, his little blond head barely topping their shoulders.

"In films, 'nice girls' who refuse nude scenes, or on-screen sex, often permit studios to use . . . surrogates. Moviegoers think they're seeing Starlet X nude or — ." We all waited for him to rhyme nude with "screwed" as automatically as we had. "A-hem," he said, trying to smile away his blush.

"What I'm asking is . . . now that you've . . . now that you're — though it is ever so

slightly — *mat-ron-ly*, if you'd object to my . . . graft-ing someone else's derriere to complement the unmatched beauty of your face, your ce-leb-ri-ty face, which possesses that pregnant *celestial* glow one can only describe as beatific. We cannot and will not ever ever ever sacrifice your face, those to-die-for cheek bones, Shannon. That I vow by all you hold holy."

"You're not using *my* ass," Lucy said. Shannon seemed startled, puzzled, maybe even insulted, but Coldwell's eyes *had* been working Lucy like a rolling pin on pie crust.

"Lucy, Honey," Spade said, mimicking Shannon, "20X is the line, not the size."

"What's so wrong with my — derriere?" Shannon said, squirming. But she had to know.

"If you'd shave more often," Lucy told Spade, "You could kiss my size six ass."

"You're perfect as you are," Lance told Shannon. He patted her butt, but winked at Spade. Spade snatched up two grapefruit halves from a tray and held them out side by side like butt cheeks, reaching in front of Tedso for Coldwell to inspect them.

"That what you're after?" Spade said. "Cause if you want a sweet little size four that's tight-hided as a full tick — ." He dropped the grapefruit and reached toward his belt for his phone camera. "Hell, here. I got a panty shot. Check out these hot pink number four Rockies. Easy on the eyes from the waist up, too, but that's Shannon's tittitory — I mean territory."

"God instructs us to forgive seventy times seven," Shannon said. "I pray for you, Spade. Don't we pray for him, Lance?"

"God's got worthier worries," Lance said. "I thought ya'll would be happy about baby Charles. Can't we talk about something besides ass?"

"Ass converts to cash," Charlie said. That was his way of reminding us all that he stood to lose, too, which led us to recall that Lance was the one who'd insisted on using Charlie's pen. My humble fee, too, depended on the pics being taken.

"That's indecent, Mister Barnes," Shannon said. "You're above that."

"Them 20X ads aint sellin' world peace nor curin' hunger," Charlie said. "They're sellin' cute little one-wrinkle butt curves." He needn't mention Shannon's loin-cloth CD cover shot. He looked to Lance for understanding — the understanding that Lance had caused it all — right

down to knocking-up Ms. 20X. Lightning flashed across the table like a search light, followed by distant thunder.

“The whole photo thing was all supposed to’ve been done and over in Jew-lie,” Lance said, “else we’d never signed on for the deal. Things got changed.” And, as if he’d found the cause for the change, he eyed Coldwell.

“Nothin to do now but cowboy up and run what we drewed,” Charlie said. He stuck out his hand. “Reach me yore phone, Spade.”

Spade loaded Panty Girl on his screen and handed her to Charlie. Charlie tried to play Grand Old Man, but he got so bad rattled from the pic that he shoved the phone at arm’s length in front of Coldwell as if he’d nabbed a copperhead by its throat. I bad wanted to look, but knew Lucy’d have none of it. Though what Lucy and I felt for one another lacked a proper name, and was likely nothing more than Love’s bastard child, Lust. Still, any time we were in the same room we shared a feeling we weren’t ready to kill. Coldwell, delicate as a doily, looked to Shannon as if asking her blessing. By then we could all see that she’d picked up on her complicity in the politics, though she still wouldn’t outright own any role. So she served herself another slice of toast and lowered her eyes to the business of burying it beneath a coat of Elena’s strawberry preserves as if she needed to sweeten the sin they meant to commit. Coldwell, his little brow crumpled, studied Panty Girl.

Later, away from the politics of seducing Shannon, he gushed to me, “She’s Aphrodite incarnate! Venus exhumed!” But at the table he said only a controlled, “She and the lens share a mutual adoration. How well do you know her?”

“As in the Biblical sense?” Spade said. He flashed his big toothy What-About-My-Bad-Self? grin.

“As in the how-much-would-she-cost sense,” Charlie said.

“Same difference,” Lucy said.

“She aint no whore,” Spade said. “She’s a model. And a actress. Starred in school plays. Does a mean Faith Hill karaoke, too. Eighteen years old. Fresh from the farm as a milk truck.

She gots dreams like everybody else. Just aint got her break, is all.”

“Don’t they take one after every dance?” Lucy said.

“She for real works at a Okie City modelin’ agency,” Spade said. “She don’t strip — ” He must’ve felt all our disbelieving eyes. “No more, anyways,” he mumbled. “Not since they confiscated her fake I.D.” He took his camera phone from Coldwell who, surprisingly, fought to hold it a bit longer.

“Where’s she model?” Shannon said. By now she was curious enough to crane her neck for a look-see.

“Don’t ‘xactly model there,” Spade said. “She’s kind of . . . a secretary. Or file clerk. They say she aint learned to walk proper.”

“Might could be she’s hip-locked,” Charlie said. His eyes took on a faraway gaze, and he let a little whistle slip between his gapped teeth. “Many a sailor’s left the sea for less.”

“Where is this young lady now?” Coldwell asked. He tongued the rim of his coffee cup as if searching for spilled sugar.

“Closer than ya might think,” Spade said. Lightning flashed again, this time followed by thunder that shook the house. Lights blinked. Rain drummed the tin roof.

“How close?” Charlie said. His tone said he’d just allowed she was the reason for Spade’s disappearance last night.

“Ya might could say walkin’ distance,” Spade said.

“In the partments?” Charlie said. He looked out the window. The rain had overflowed the sagging gutter and was gushing past the glass so fast we couldn’t see the pecan tree.

“You want that I bring should her in?” Spade said.

Everybody, even Shannon, looked to Charlie. But it was Elena who spoke. She’d been listening from the sink where she’d been scrubbing dishes. She tossed her towel on the cluttered counter and stormed to the table, shaking a finger.

“Este casa es la casa de los ninos perdidos!” Elena scolded. She glared hardest at Charlie but stared upon us all, crossed herself, and rolled her eyes to the low tile ceiling where new leaks

were darkening the old water stains around the slowly spinning ceiling fan. “A Dios!”

“The house of lost boys?” Spade said. “Hell, we know right where we are.”

Lightning struck so close we smelled the sulfur. Elena fled to her bedroom to wait out the storm, I supposed, or maybe to escape us while she knelt before her crucifix.

“She didn’t mean ‘lost’ as in location,” Lucy said. “She meant damned. ‘Perdidos’ translates to ‘damned,’ as in lost souls. Your whorehouse Spanish is limited, Spado. And she didn’t mean just boys. ‘Ninos’ refers to both genders in this usage.”

“Damn shore ought to,” Charlie said. He stared into the rain. “Think yore gal’s awake?” he asked Spade.

“Can be,” Spade said. He lifted his phone, scrolling for her number. I marveled at the speed at which he conned the world. He, Charlie, and Lance had only rolled home from rodeos the day before. Who, I wondered, but a homeless girl would’ve let Spade haul her out to Charlie’s on a first date?

“Let her sleep,” Charlie said. Dangerous as it is to speculate another man’s thinking, I allowed that Charlie was contemplating his Prodigal son. Lance had married a Christian recording star. Spade had brought home a stripper. “She got a name?” Charlie asked.

“Goes by Mercedes,” Spade said. “Like the car.” He turned to Shannon and grinned, his bloodshot eyes glowing red as fire ants above his dark beard stubble. “Aint ya thankful you’re gonna have a Mercedes rear end in place of that Peterbilt splattered across all the magazines?”

Nobody could’ve blamed her for spitting on him, but Shannon smiled at Spade calm as the Madonna and spoke kind and tender as a mother to a newborn. She touched his stubbled cheek and held her hand there. I waited on sarcasm or slaps that didn’t come.

“You do not mean to be mean, Spade,” she said. “You are loving in your heart. No matter how you torment me, I will always love you as a brother, my brother in God.”

She said it real enough to silence Spade, who looked to Lance as if to say, “You aint got a chance, Brother of the Road.” Shannon turned to Coldwell

“Couldn’t you shoot me as I am?” she asked him “then downsize my fanny? You’re the

wizard, aren't you?"

Could he have? Who knows? Plenty of folks who claim to know have since allowed that he could. But anyone who'd seen Mercedes' camera cameo mirrored in his eyes knew that he was not going to. And anyone who'd seen Spade seeing Mercedes mirrored in Coldwell's eyes knew that Coldwell — the boyish dreamer schemer and now come-betweenner — would've been better born blind.

Chapter Thirteen

The dogging steers stood huddled downwind of the cedar break by the five-wire fence in Charlie's west trap. Light, steady rain spilled like silver beads from the low gray sky, and the steers' hides glowed shiny and wet as spilled paint. Butts to the wind, they stood hump-backed, crowding for warmth, their hook bones and shoulder blades prodding each other. They'd be an hour drying --- if I could get them to the barn. The lightning had them boogery as late-season quail, and I knew I'd ought to have waited for help.

Still, I'd ki-yed them about halfway when they bulked at motion in a cedar clump fifty yards ahead. Horse's hooves flashed past low limbs then stopped behind a bushy cedar, as if a rider had tried to hide until the steers passed. It was Lucy, fighting a dink ex-race colt I'd left saddled and bitted up in its stall. The colt belonged to one of Charlie's pedigree-pumping clients who fantasized that its papers guaranteed cow sense. But in a month it'd showed not one lick of sense, cow or otherwise. And Lucy'd shown less by bringing him to the pasture when Charlie had a barn full of good horses. I whooped and lashed sky with my rope until its whine set the steers trotting again, heads-up and skittish, as they swung a muddy arc around the cedars. Lucy came jiggling sideways on the head-slinging dink, her voice wading the wet wind.

"You left the table without excusing yourself," she said. The steaming colt slung his long, hollow head and jiggled in place, spooking the steers and filling the air with his hot-horse scent. Sawing his bit, Lucy kept him more or less still until I reined Mack in beside her. Rain dripped from the brims of our hats and spilled from the tails of our slickers. The hot-wet-horse smell hovered above the stink of muddy steers.

"Same way you left my life," I said. "Thought about gettin' my name changed to No Call."

The edgy colt pranced alongside Mack, slobber dripping off the snaffle bit.

“I think of you a lot,” she said.

“That apparently aint the same as thinkin’ a lot of me,” I said.

“It’s complicated,” she said.

I whooped at the steers and rode Mack tighter on them. Lucy fought the colt around the herd to block their escape as they funneled toward the barn gate. In minutes they were all penned. When the colt jiggled through behind the last steer, Mack leaned against the big steel gate, then side-passed as I drew it around until the latch clicked. I patted his neck. Lucy swung down and stepped in front of Mack, rain spilling from her hat brim and slicker. Rain and wind driving against the roof and walls of the big metal barn rushed loud and constant as a tall waterfall. I leaned forward in the saddle to hear Lucy.

“Evan jumped his first steer off this guy,” she said. Evan? It took me a bit to remember that Evan was her dead brother. She peeled off her wet gloves and stroked Mack’s pink-flecked nose. “By now a thousand guys probably have.”

“Solid as a stump,” I said. I suddenly dreaded a repeat of Lucy’s meltdown on Evan’s birthday at her folks’ place that now seemed long ago. But I needn’t have worried. Whatever the cause, Lucy rubbed noses with Mack and cooed to him, playful. I wanted to believe that maybe, just maybe, she was actually glad to see me. If she’d taken herself a new man since I’d seen her, it didn’t show. And what if she had? We’d not promised anything except that we wouldn’t love one another. But her silence had left me confused and empty. I’d let myself believe that the scene on the bluff had connected us if only in flesh. Since then we’d had a few strained calls that always began and ended with the sense that I’d interrupted something I ought not interrupt again. Our life had become a nonsense line in a country song: “When your phone don’t ring, that’ll be me.” I stepped down and walked to her. She touched a finger to my scarred nose, her eyes full of

dare.

“Been taking good care of my horses, stable boy?”

She trailed her finger slow and light over my lips.

“They’ve missed no meals,” I said. “But be damned if I’ll lash ‘em round the cans. Maybe you can con Charlie into hirin’ you an exercise girl.”

“Like Mercedes?” she said. “You were quite the gentleman. I was impressed that you didn’t scale the table for a look.”

“I’ll see her soon enough. Besides, her Rockies aint the ones I want to climb on.”

She squeezed my face between her cold hands and squinted into my eyes as if examining me: Chance Jacob Hendrix, Case Study Thirteen-Thirteen, Rodeo Addict, Emotionally Challenged. I pulled her to me until our wet ponchos crinkled together. If she aimed to spook and run, it might as well be sooner. I’d rather have her gone than close and out of reach. She let me kiss her.

“What’s so complicated?” I said.

She wrapped her arms around me and kissed me, her tongue playful.

“Want to show me your ‘partment?” she said. I looked toward the house.

“Charlie’s holding them hostage with war stories,” she said. That’s what we called his Tales of the Rodeo Trail. “Coldwell tried to record Charlie.”

“Charlie stopped it?”

“In a manner of speaking. He priced it. ‘Them’s copyrighted material,’ he told Coldwell. He said he’d need Shannon’s agent to negotiate for him.”

Lucy pressed tighter against me. She raised herself on tiptoes, nibbled my neck, pulled at my shoulders. Her hair smelled wet and clean from rain.

“Some nights I lie awake thinking about you,” she said.

“You’ve cost me a little sleep, too,” I said. She gave one of those what-can-I-say? shrugs with a matching sigh. I wondered if she meant to torture me again, and if she did, why oh why did I feel happy as a muddy hog while I handed her the hot shot.

“We’d never be good together,” she said.

“Who claims we’re any good apart?” I said.

“If we were to make — ” she stopped herself from saying love. “If we went to bed together, would you keep your promise?”

“Not to love you?”

“Can you?”

“You think you’re that easy to love?”

“Men tend to. I don’t, no.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t find myself an easy person to love.”

“But men do?”

“I’m not saying they find me easy. To love, I mean.” She tried to keep her tone playful, but it’s hard to talk about a thing without naming it, and to name it, if we’d even known its name, would have admitted it, as in giving it a ticket that says, Admit One, and then watching it make camp in the front row by the big screen called My Life.

“If we can’t talk about it,” she said, “let’s not. Talk.”

We halted and tied the horses, then hand in hand passed the tack room and scaled the gossipy plank steps between the narrow board walls into the loft where somewhere Mercedes must surely lie sleeping. We soft-stepped like burglars to silence our spurs, rain once again drumming the tall tin roof. In my cluttered room Lucy undressed to her white size six Rockies without a whit of modesty, lay on my unmade mess of a bed, and whispered for me to lie on my

back beside her. I stripped and dropped to the crumb-strewn mattress.

“I can’t take you inside me,” she whispered. She started with the hand job until I caught her wrist.

“Moby gets enough of that action,” I said.

“Moby?” she giggled. “Never met a Moby.”

I wouldn’t let myself think about the names she had met.

“He’s craving one of them bottom-scraping, belly-rubbing plunges,” I said. “He don’t need no stinking massage.”

“It’s the wrong time,” she said.

“Not by my clock,” I said. “Moby swims the Red Sea.” I tugged at her panties.

“I don’t mean that,” she said. “I mean it’s the wrong time in our lives.”

I forced my hand between her thighs.

“Chance,” she said, “No.”

She didn’t grab my hand. She didn’t push me away. She just said, “No,” not even loud or mad. And it worked. So, says I silently to my bad self, this is “you can have me any way you like”? I was tempted to remind her of our pact, but if she didn’t want me inside her, I didn’t want to be there.

“Let me finish,” she said. So I did. I asked what I could do for her.

“Lie still,” she said. “And silent.”

She cleaned me with the sheet then spread herself like a quilt on my chest and legs, a light sweat fine as dew on her dimpled skin in the cool dim light. She’d feel invaded, she said, violated, if she took me now. What she was asking without asking was who I’d been with since she’d not been with me. The answer was, No one, but I sensed she didn’t want me to say it because it was a truth that packed a saddle bag full of obligation. As Granddaddy used to say,

“Best not open that can of worms ‘til you’re ready to fish.” We weren’t. So we talked of safer things. I talked horses and bulldogging techniques. She told me about all the new research that excited her, the people doing work that healed broken minds and made losers into winners. We both had dreams to fill before love or time could kill them, she said. I lay there with my arms around her and listened to her low soft voice until she’d talked herself almost unconscious.

“Lucy,” I said. I kissed her curls and breathed her warm rainy scent. “I don’t love you. Never will.”

“Thank you,” she said, drowsy as summer haze. “I don’t love you either. Nor will I ever. Isn’t this lo — ?” She’d started to say lovely but caught herself in the word-dodging dark comedy of our lives. “Loveless?” she said. “Isn’t this perfectly loveless?”

“Have you talked with your folks?” I said. My thoughts kept rewinding themselves to that night we’d bluffed on the bluff.

“Have you?” she said.

“Judge calls regular,” I teased. “Miss Rosa, not so much.”

“We break all their hearts,” she said. “What more could they ask of us?”

“Thank the Arena Gods we aint seeded the earth with the crop to break ours,” I said.

“Like Shannon and Lance, you mean.”

“You know,” I said, “little Charlie’ll likely be one of those princes every mother wants her daughter to marry.” Cynical though I could be, I was honestly moved by Shannon’s sincerity toward Spade and her loyalty to Lance and Charlie. If she’d chosen to act on it, she was above us all, way above. She had clout, class, and cash enough to be anywhere and with anyone she fancied. Only loyalty to Lance powered her rig up Charlie’s rutted lane. “Those two might could be just fine together,” I said. “My folks always allowed they’d stuck together through all their hard times by believin’ in a Higher Being. Seems like maybe Lance and Shannon own belief in

somethin' beyond themselves, too."

"Marketing," Lucy said. "Proselytizing."

"And God," I said, odd as it sounded. I allowed how for months I'd thought long but wrong that Shannon was counterfeit as a three-dollar bill.

"Don't be so sure you were wrong," Lucy said. "Faith untested"

My door sneaked open, and in it materialized a waif who had to be Mercedes, a pink knee-length I Heart NY tee shirt hiding her asset, but baring those long lean legs. Lucy ripped a blanket over us and glared.

"Sor-ry," Mercedes said. At eighteen, if she was, she wore the shy innocent aura of a tangle-maned first-grader who'd stumbled in on her naked parents. Her long thick curly hair, red as barn paint, framed stormy eyes deep green as a clover leaf and the size of silver dollars. Below her kewpie-doll nose spread Liv Tyler lips that parted just enough to suggest surprise. She rubbed her stormy eyes, squinted, pursed her pouty lips, and wobbled sideways as if the floor had shifted. "Where's the, uh, like, bathroom?"

"Third door to your right," I said. She turned away then turned back to focus, this time with deep, knowing, almost accusing eyes that locked on mine with enough force to strip me of the key to releasing myself. She shuffled backward, her feathery eyelashes still matted with sleep, leaving the door open, and turned left.

"The other right," Lucy said. "And the door?"

Mercedes drew the door closed. Rain peppered the tin roof, a new round of storms, and storms always excited me. I kissed Lucy and felt myself swelling.

"Like a hand?" Lucy cooed. She palmed Moby, slowly at first. She lay beside me, pressing her body tight, her leg draped over mine.

“Take off your panties,” I said. “Why cheat yourself?”

“Call me Mercedes,” Lucy whispered. “Let me be your fantasy fuck.”

“You already are,” I said. She ignored the irony, seemingly content that she was effing my mind.

“I’m not. Call me Mercedes. It’s Mercedes that Moby wants. And she didn’t have to show you a thing.”

But she had shown me something. I’d seen the lethal blend of shapes and colors that could blind a man to all other women — except Lucinda Rose Barnes, whom I’d vowed never to love. I drew her ear to my lips.

“Lucy,” I whispered. “I want *you*. Lucy. Lucy.” I stroked the valley of her spine and chanted her name — Lucy Lucy Lucy Lucy — until she ran her other hand inside her panties as she worked me. She whimpered, shuddered, sobbed, and shuddered again. Outside, the new storm front drove the weight of its wind hard against the barn, spilling rain onto the roof in waves that came and came and came.

Chapter Fourteen

Horses or men, Charlie's philosophy was that if you trained the mind, the body followed. For horses, Charlie allowed, the simple surgical procedure of castration sped training by years. But since the gelding of men had won precious few fans, Charlie's mantra for all who passed through his pen became, "Know which head yore thinkin' with." Though no one recalled Charlie ever reading a verse nor warming a pew, he'd lifted three lessons from the Bible: 1. The Lord helps he who helps hisself; 2. Eve damned Adam; 3. Delilah betrayed Samson. At one of his dogging schools, I did witness Charlie snatch a lovesick kid by the hair when the kid packed for home after the first day to appease his sweetie, who'd been calling and texting nonstop. In front of everybody, Charlie pretended to scissor the kid's hair as he drawled, "You bury one head in some sweet little piece of wool, the other comes away shorn. Know which head yore thinkin' with, boy." The kid stayed. Somebody later said he'd hooked up with a new girl.

From the get-go Lucy had been the want-don't-want romantic logjam in my River of Hope. She was — Coldwell said — Promise itself. What he meant, I am yet to know. Even now, looking back, I know as I knew then that our confused state wasn't just about the money and status that divided us. I'd never felt confused with my ex-sweet little rich girl who had the status and money enough to buy respectability for a hind-teat hick such as I. But in that deal, we'd each been clear what the other wanted, and our contradictory wants had run true as train tracks all the way to their vanishing point. With Lucy, I felt as if I'd been dealt into a poker game where bluff trumped all cards, and she of the bankrupt heart still held the most chips, stacked mostly on her shoulders.

"I'm relying on you," she'd say the rare times she phoned or answered my calls. "Our role is mutual support toward our goals, Chance. Not love, we promised. Would you rather I

become *her*?”

Her — need I say? — was my ex-sweet little rich girl. And the answer I couldn't make myself say had become a secret, “Yes,” because at least with *her* I'd never questioned our deal. As a chronic insomniac such as I was becoming is prone to do, I passed dark hours in my bunk trying to grasp who and what Lucy and I were to one another. One night I recalled advice Daddy once gave me: “No matter how shiny and new the bricks, Son, the mortar's mixed from the sands of our past.” When I stirred Lucy's and my shallow sandy pasts, I excavated this warped little nugget: I'd wanted her because she didn't want me, and she'd wanted me because she'd believed I wanted no one. Against those toxic seeds for a relationship, Romeo and Juliet became light comedy.

And I knew without knowing how I knew that our warped nugget of origin had been further scarred by Lucy's Breakdown on the Bluffs. People who show themselves vulnerable often as not scorn the ones who comforted them. Example: when I was barely old enough to cinch my own saddle, one violent night my folks took in a battered neighbor lady, Marie Eldridge, a squat, tired, grayed-too-young woman who laundered folks' clothes, cleaned houses, and sold truck garden and eggs. That wicked night she'd fled from her mean-fisted husband, Zach, with two her youngest kids, three broken ribs, and four bloody gaps that yellowed teeth had filled an hour earlier. While she and her kids hid behind the wood furnace in our basement, Daddy trained on Zach with an axe handle under the amber pole light beside our yard gate. From my upstairs window I watched Daddy drive Zach like a steel post into the bloody snow drifts that glowed redder yet when the sheriff's lights came spinning up our drive. For over a week my folks nursed, fed, and sheltered Marie and her kids. Then one day, sudden as she'd come, Marie thanked them and moved back with Zack. Over the next few months before they left Plainston for good, we'd sometimes see Marie at the grocery store or post office. But it was as if Daddy

and Momma were invisible to her. I once asked Momma why Mrs. Eldridge had turned so cold and snotty when they'd been her only friends.

“Because that’s what we were,” Momma said. She was neither angry nor sad. She talked in the same tone Daddy used when he allowed that things had turned out the way they were meant to be. “When she sees us, it’s not us she sees, Chance. She sees herself as we saw her, and she can’t tolerate being seen that way. You’ll understand in God’s time.”

God’s clock had ticked to my time for understanding with Lucy. Though certainty in a man’s thinking about women can be scarce as desert rain, I sensed that Lucy now saw me as the lone witness to her crime of feeling grief — and love. And because of the power she wrongly perceived that giving me, she felt the need to keep me both close and distant, which was exactly how I’d felt.

But Charlie was right. If I ever meant to know Lance’s level of success, or even Spade’s, I needed to control which head did my thinking. I needed to be in the practice pen a whole lot more than I needed Lucy’s confusion. When I’d asked Charlie over that crazy breakfast could we practice until the sun came out, Coldwell brightened. Might he watch? Damn shore could, Charlie promised. Photograph it? Maybe. The deal was on. So when the storm had settled to a steady soaking rain, I’d quit the house to finish chores and saddle the practice horses. But despite all I’ve claimed about tending business, when Lucy flashed me her Mona Lisa smile as I stood to go, I wanted her to follow. I wanted her once more to explain my bad self to me in a way that let us keep being whatever it was we were and were not to one another. I didn’t want us not to be at all. And later, after she’d fallen asleep naked and soft beside me in my bunk, I lay awake thinking that things were getting out of hand because of what was in hand. Then, lulled by Lucy’s easy breathing and the rain, I recklessly let myself sleep.

Our phones woke us with that shrill secret urgency they can convey, first mine, then

Lucy's, mine, Lucy's, mine until Lucy reached across me, grabbed my phone from the lamp table, and dropped it on my chest. It was Spade.

“Bed alert, Big Thump, bed alert,” he said low. “You and Lucy best get vertical. Everybody's in the porch pullin' on their boots right now.” Lucy, in that uncanny way women know things, had already slid off the bed, gathered our clothes from the floor, and started to dress.

“Let 'em come,” I said. “Nothin' to hide.”

“Give it up,” Spade said. “You think Mercedes *accidentally* walked in on ya? You caint play a player, son.”

“No playin' goin' on,” I said. I was no longer thinking of Lucy or me. I was thinking that if Mercedes could make spy work look as innocent as she had, she sure enough needed to be watched. I wouldn't forget.

“What'd ya think of Mercedes?” he said, giddy. Either last night's booze still hadn't left his brain, or he'd restocked. “Did ol' Spade find the bee tree, or what? And the way things are goin' with Coldwell's deal, my little honey thinks I'm a Godsend.”

“You're a saint,” I said, snatching my shirt. “Lucifer.”

“Speakin' of Lucy-fer, since I done you this favor, Big Thump, how's 'bout you kiss her ass 'fore she gets her panties on and tell her it's from me? You can kiss mine when I get there.”

He hung up. Lucy was wiggling into her jeans when I yanked her Rockies down and kissed her butt. She swatted at me and kept dressing.

“From Spade,” I said.

“He sent her,” she said. “I knew it.” She tucked her blouse tail and hitched her belt. “He only warned us to spare Uncle Charlie, you know. He wouldn't piss on you if you were burning.”

“Why don’t matter,” I said. “Same result.” I was grateful he’d called, though I suspected he saw it as a debt meant to be collected, with interest. I dressed fast and trailed Lucy out the door. The storm past, the sloped tin roof lay silent, the air warming as if the wind had switched to the south.

Mercedes was standing at the top of the stairs, dressed in vintage Salvation Army --- raggedy faded jeans, tattered red tennis shoes with holes in the toes, and a baggy U2 tee shirt under a bleach-pocked flak jacket with Che Guevara stitched to the left front pocket. She’d knotted a white gypsy scarf around her hair, the ends drooping on her right shoulder like a floppy-eared bunny’s. If somebody would’ve bundled rags in a red hankie hitched to a pole and laid it over her shoulder, she’d have been poised to catch a handful of gone on the next west-bound Burlington Northern. But even shrouded in rags like a lost ragamuffin, that hair, those eyes, those lips, could drive men to crime and women to suicide. She’d be poison as rat-killer in the barn.

Lucy seemed set on saying something snide, but by the time we were close enough for such pleasantries a godawful teeth-chipping shiver had claimed Mercedes. We eased closer. She lowered her eyes and quartered away with a farm girl shyness that denied she’d ever stripped or modeled or found herself bedded by Spade, though her very presence in that barn and in his camera sealed her conviction.

She was shaking so hard she’d developed a stutter. “I ne-ne-ne-need a ri-ri-ride,” she said without facing us. Her little voice came mournful as a dove’s cry. “I’ll p-p-pay gas. Sp-sp-spade can’t k-k-know.”

She’d been picking at a door jamb with a fingernail, but now she dragged her nails down it hard enough to peel splinters under her nails. She stared hard into the wood, as if seeing in it something that needed to be gouged out.

“To where?” Lucy said. “And why right now?”

“Tulsa. To a, uh, friend’s. Cause I’m scared. And I’m scared to say why.”

“Of what?” Lucy said. She stepped close and touched the shoulder of Mercedes’ flak

jacket. “Did someone threaten you?” Like Spade, she meant. The girl shook her head not.

“Every . Fricking. Time. All. My. F-ed up life,” Mercedes muttered. She punctuated each fractured sentence with another dig of her fingernails into the pine board. She clawed harder with each syllable, as if she’d rather dig through a wall than open a door. A fingernail broke deep and jagged to the quick. She seemed not to feel pain nor see the blood. Lucy, seemingly charmed by what I suspected might be yet another of Mercedes’ acts, eased an arm around Mercedes’ waist to stop her shaking. And when Mercedes broke out in a crazy laugh, it was the *to-keep-from-crying* kind. Her wild stormy eyes lent her the damsel-in-distress aura that sends men to their doom. She owned the false innocence men would die to keep from exposing. I’d have given the girl a kidney. If I had to cut it out myself. No anesthetic.

“I’ll drive you,” Lucy said. Lucy’s tone hinted that Mercedes had become her most recent Subject of Study. I’ve come to understand that so long as Lucy concentrates on others’ pathologies, her own shush themselves in the shadows. “But only if I know why,” Lucy said.

The little pause Mercedes took before answering was the kind to cause questions, especially in Lucy’s studied way of thinking. This distressed damsel had — I reminded myself yet again — spied for Spade not an hour earlier.

“Okay,” Mercedes said. She clenched her fists and made herself breathe slower. “Here it is. I’m, like, freaking terrified --- terr – I --- fied of horses. I get hives, horses scare me so bad.” She drew up a coat sleeve and pointed with her bleeding finger to the red welts dotting her arm. “Hives.” A red flare that her long hair had masked was vining up her throat. “I laid awake, like, all night cause they were below me. Their smell scares me. Their noises scare me. Everything about them scares me.”

“And you came home with a cowboy?” Lucy said.

“He didn’t say nothin’ about no pictures.”

She looked to us as if hoping to prove her innocence until she had to read in our faces the shared understanding that her panty snapshot in Spade’s phone camera was either the curse or the blessing that the Arena Gods had yet to classify as either. Either way, it was a picture.

Mercedes lowered her eyes.

“Not with horses,” she muttered, amending herself.

“He thinks you love horses,” Lucy said.

“He treated me so sweet,” Mercedes said. Those green eyes lightened. “He made me laugh. He’s *so* funny. He likes me for who I am. A girl can tell. So I lied about liking horses. For him. But they terrify me.”

I’d heard so many ugly pony tales of people traumatized by horses that I didn’t bother asking the source of hers. Nor did I grasp how she claimed Spade liked her for who she was, if who she was was a liar. At best, he liked her for who she’d deceived him into thinking she was, which opened questions about Lucy and me. Yet still — for reasons I could no more name than control — I felt obligated to cheer the girl.

“We got horses that help invalids cross interstates,” I said. I wanted to make her laugh. “One of them used to be a seein’-eye horse for a blind kid. Kid was as bad scared of dogs as you are horses. Another one saved a whole family of seven from a house fire. That right, Lucy?”

“We’ll get you help,” Lucy said. Whether to me or Mercedes wasn’t clear.

“I’m *so* broke,” Mercedes said. “Been broke all my life. A broke nobody. I get one real chance and it, like, gets shot to”

“A shot’s just what those hives need,” Lucy said. She touched the red vine that’d scaled Mercedes’ cheek. “We’ll find a physician who’ll prescribe a relaxant, too. That’ll ease your fears.”

“Caint pay,” Mercedes said.

“Family?” Lucy said.

“Dead,” she said. But she said it in a way that made it seem more wish than truth.

“How about a shot of Jack Daniels?” I said. I’d meant it as a joke before I realized that I’d meant it. Lucy glared. Though booze in Charlie’s barn was cause for eviction, I kept an evaporating fifth under the Motel 6 mattress in Flatlander.

“Worked for me,” I said. “I used to break out in hives every time a prof assigned a

speech.”

“You went to class drunk?” Mercedes said. She ignored the phone ringing in her jacket pocket. Outside, voices were closing on the barn.

“Inebriated,” I said. “Those days I had class.”

Lucy groaned. Mercedes didn’t get it.

“I’ll try anything,” she said. That, I damn sure didn’t doubt. Lucy gave me a *you-can’t-be-serious* look, but with voices closer yet to the barn, she was weakening. Besides, she was too much into the workings of the mind to miss this little experiment.

“Aint like she’ll be drivin’,” I told Lucy. “Just one thing — if Charlie sniffs it, she brought the bottle.” I faced Mercedes. “Fair enough?”

“They’ll really be gentle?” she said. “The horses?”

“They’ll hand you Kleenexes with their teeth when you sneeze,” I said. “And they’ll cry when you go.” Go she did, and without tears. Lucy hustled her out a back way just as the crew filed in the front door, their voices marking their entrance. For a bit, I stood at the top of the stairs where her lethal vulnerability lingered like after notes of a ringing bell. Even then I sensed that Charlie’s three Bible lessons were destined to become four, the fourth one involving Mercedes. But what deed? And with what man? It seemed more a question of when than if.

“Our squeezes still up there?” Spade yelled. I’d started down by the time he charged the stairs, taking them two at a time, his heavy steps on the planks shaking the narrow walls. When we met halfway he shouldered me, playful but strong, his dark eyes drilling for Guilt’s hidden twitch. “You ain’t been dippin’ into Spade’s honey well, now have ya, Big Thump? Don’t you lie to ol’ Spade.”

“Your little bee buzzed to the wrong kind of hives,” I said. I told him about her phobia and my remedy. He shook his head and worked his mouth, his face and neck muscles drawn tight as shrunk boots.

“Hotdamn!” he said. “Why didn’t the poor kid say so? Hives? Hotdamn! Whiskey? Hotdamn damn double-damn! If Charlie even whiffs the booze . . . You surprise me, Big Thump,

beddin' Miss Lucy then pourin' whis-kay into a minor. What ought a man of my pristine sensibilities say to a story like this?"

"Like what?" Coldwell said. His cheery voice fluttered up to us. "What wonderful new narrative now complements our repertoire?"

He and Tedso had camped in the narrow stairwell below us, framed in the doorway, Coldwell nearly lost inside Tedso's shadow. Though I didn't know it yet, I later understood that Coldwell had grown drunk in ways I hadn't seen. He'd come to Charlie's just a tad tipsy on swill brewed from tales of the west. And the realities of that rainy morning might've sobered him right if Charlie hadn't poured 100-proof rodeo lore down his slender little throat until those already glowing boyish eyes of his glazed plumb over. Now he was over the legal limit on myth and determined — though we didn't know it yet — to immortalize us all. And bearing (baring?) the bull's eye of his mad vision on her size four asset was Miss Equine Phobia herself.

We went down the stairs, Spade leading, the narrow walls filled with echoes of boot heels and spurs until the arena sand muffled our steps. Spade draped his arm over the narrow shoulders of Coldwell's crisp denim jacket as if explaining to a kid that he'd just run over his dog. He ushered little Coldwell away from the stairs and spoke to him so softly I couldn't hear, then guided him back. In those few steps he'd told Coldwell the one thing I'd been sure he wouldn't — the truth.

"Afraid of horses?" Coldwell said. He struggled to float a sinking smile. "You presented her as a farm girl."

"Not all farms got horses," Spade said.

"I wish to speak with her directly."

"And, directly, you will," Spade said. "Lucy's workin' some psychology on her now. Likely be fine."

Coldwell looked to me as if seeking a second opinion.

"Lucy's got a magic potion," I said. Spade smirked. But neither of us was ready for the change that claimed Coldwell.

“She cannot fear horses,” he said. He squared his little jaw and smashed his left fist into his right palm with more wallop than his little body ought to have packed. “It cannot be so. It. Will. Not. Be. So. She must overcome it. I will help her.”

He looked to Spade, me, and Tedso as if he dared us to say otherwise.

“Might best leave that to us,” Spade said. Then, respecting the tension between him and Coldwell with a sensitivity that surprised me, he said, “Lucy’s a hand. Leave her do it.”

“You lied to me?” Coldwell said. If not for queering Charlie’s deal, Spade would likely have splintered a plank with Coldwell’s suddenly stiff little spine.

“More like I told ya what ya wanted to hear,” Spade said. “If it makes me a liar, it’s the kind that keeps Santa Clause alive. Besides, I couldn’t hide what I didn’t know, could I?”

The odd bravado of Coldwell’s eyes and jaw vanished slowly, like the face of a melting snowman, and in its place settled a sad pall thick as swamp fog and more mysterious. At the time it seemed to me that neither his bravado nor his sorrow had adequate cause. Little as he was, he looked like a kid whose birthday balloon had slipped his grip and ridden the sky out of sight.

“Your precise words were — I quote — ‘This’ll be a dream come true.’ Did you not say that?”

“If I did,” Spade said, “I meant it in a general way, like winnin’ the lottery. What was I supposed to say?”

“One’s motive determines one’s diction,” Coldwell said. “Can you articulate yours?”

“Come again?” Spade said.

“Can you state your motive for volunteering Mercedes? For . . . *exposing* her, if you will, to an obligation she can’t fulfill?”

Spade listened with his dark brooding face quartered away, his head tilted slightly toward Coldwell, as if standing beside a truck while listening for a ticking engine valve on a lonely midnight stretch of highway. He faced little Coldwell again, looking down into Coldwell’s upturned eyes.

“Nobody said she caint do it,” Spade said. “You aint gave Lucy a chance yet.”

“Perhaps you’re correct,” Coldwell said, sarcastic and pretending to smile. “Perhaps the storm will yield to golden sunlight and Mercedes’ equine phobia will evaporate in the glowing brilliance of Lucinda’s analysis.”

“What is it you want me to say to make you happy?” Spade said.

“It’s Mercedes’ happiness we’re discussing,” Coldwell said. “I’m rather the stoic myself — indifferent to pleasure or pain.”

“I wouldn’t of knowed,” Spade said.

Coldwell’s blue eyes paled. He drew out his tape recorder and talked spooky slow to no one as if he didn’t mean to be heard. “The first order of a dream — the one so easily overlooked — is that it must be dreamed. Only then can it can come true. Otherwise it’s an ontological impossibility, like multiplying zero. Zero times zero. Zero. Zero. Zero.”

Coldwell trudged toward the side door, Tedso shadowing him like a bear walking upright behind his handler. I felt bad for him.

“What’s that about?” Spade said. “She’s nothin’ to him.”

“Seems otherwise,” I said.

“Best not be.”

“Try bein’ him,” I said. “Worms his way here. Finds Shannon secretly pregnant. You taunt him with a horse-phobic sub. The man’s got cause enough for grief.”

“That don’t explain all his dream-dream-dream blather,” Spade said.

“She makes a man want to hand her the world wrapped with a pretty pink bow,” I said. “Little, Coldwell may be, but the way he sees hers says he’s more man than shows.”

Spade looked at me with hard, hot eyes.

“You, too?” he said. “She burn you down, too?”

“Every man,” I said. “You aim to keep her, that’ll be your curse.”

“You sayin’ she’ll play me?”

“Nope. Just that she’ll never lack for chance.”

“You’re one Chance she’d best lack,” Spade said. He looked to Coldwell, then to the

door where Lucy and Mercedes had gone and were overdue to walk through again. He seemed troubled, as if he'd for the first time realized that all men lusted as he did for Mercedes.

"Nobody plays Spade," he said. He spat and glared across the arena at Coldwell.

"You future champeeins ready to bulldog?" Charlie yelled. He, Lance, and Shannon had been sorting the steers in the pen where I'd left them on the far side of the arena, a hundred feet from us. Charlie and Lance stood leaning on a gate, but Shannon sat low-bellied and broad-butted on a dun barrel horse that Charlie was trying to convince her she needed. Topsy darted under boards, nipping steers' hocks and dodging their kicks with such glee that if she'd ever have quit snarling at me, I'd have asked Lucy to leave her at the barn where she could be happy.

"Coldwell!" Spade yelled. When Coldwell and Tedso turned toward him, Spade waved for them to join.

"Camera," Coldwell called back, his voice child-like in the big hollow barn. He pantomimed raising a camera and clicking the shutter. Then he and Tedso escaped out the side door. Spade and I hustled toward Charlie, who'd been hawking us all like a prison tower guard.

"The girls ought have been back," I said low to Spade. "That fifth was near full."

"She's with Lucy," Spade said.

"That brings you comfort?" I said.

"Back in a minute," he yelled to Charlie. He turned and trotted across the arena and out the same door Tedso had just closed.

But he wasn't back in a minute. None of them was. And Charlie sure enough noticed. The short day was fading. We stood leaning on the pen looking at nothing, Lance to Charlie's left, I on his right. Several times Charlie's eyes probed me until finally, as if to say, "We'll see soon enough," Charlie drew his Cope from his shirt pocket and slowly packed a fresh chew. He rested his eyes on the steer's bony backs, staring into my thinking. I wanted him to look away.

"Why I feel like there's another storm buildin', Big Thump?"

"Sir Arthur?" I said. Sir Arthur was what Charlie called the face-twisting arthritis that'd camped in his left knee after years of surgeries. He called the lesser pain in his dislocated right

shoulder Arty because “it’s the hind-teat runt so far as pain goes.” Broken ribs, fingers, jaws, noses, and various other dings went nameless. Charlie glanced over his shoulder, and when he saw Shannon loping the dun at the far end of the arena, he said low, “No ‘fense to yore bride, Lance, cause she’s a damn shore fine lady who’d be exempted, but might could be time to hang a new sign.”

Everybody who followed rodeo knew about Charlie’s sign, but I’d always taken it as more lore than truth until Lucy validated it for me. She’d drawn me a miniature of the sign, misspelling the letters exactly as Charlie had. The story went that just before his fourth wife, Peggy, filed for divorce a few years earlier, Charlie had nailed up a crude sign over the arena’s main entry door, huge red letters that’d streaked like dried blood on a full-sized sheet of plywood: THIS HERE IS A ESTRAGIN FREE ENVIROMET. THANK U FOR NOT BITCHIN. Peggy, who’d long before packed away all her emotions but hurt and hate, left. Lucy crow-barred the sign to splinters and burned it.

“Women take time,” I said. Charlie saw into me as if he, instead of Mercedes, had opened the door on me and Lucy in bed. I doubted he wanted me for kin. And he knew the full weight of Lucy’s dead-brother baggage.

“In more ways than you likely meant that,” he said.

“All *relative*,” Lance said. His Golden Boy looks belied his cowboy orneriness. “Time, I mean. Time demands are *relative*.” He smiled an accusing smile and winked. “*Relative to who* — I mean *what* — a man’s doing.”

Lance winked again. Charlie folded his thick arms on the top board and let his faraway eyes skip across the steers’ bony backs in a scorching silence. Charlie’s barn, I’d learned too late, could no more hold a secret than it could hold a spooked sparrow. He knew I’d been with Lucy, but I sensed he didn’t yet know what he’d do about it. To my relief, everybody returned. We heard their chatter long before the door opened and they filed in, Lucy leading, Mercedes flanked by Spade and Coldwell, Tedso tall and bent as a bear with his arms full of cameras and tripods. Coldwell was back to himself, all frenzy and energy, enough bolder to suggest he’d tipped down

a little of my tonic himself. The boozy procession flowed all the way to where we stood before they milled to a stop in a swirl of arena dust.

If Mercedes was Cinderella, her fairy godmother had waved a mighty fine wand. The ragamuffin duds had been replaced with size four Wrangler 20X jeans and a tight white frilly blouse knotted above her bared navel. Long pick artificial nails covered the damage she'd done clawing at the apartment door. Somebody had teased her long loose hair until it breezed around her face and shoulders red and light as a loping fox. And, as soon as they'd gathered beside us, Coldwell handed her a shoe-box-new pair of red Justin ropers he'd been carrying. Goosebumps lined her freckled skin in the cool damp air. With Spade's arm around her bared waist and the boots in one hand, she braced her other hand on Coldwell's little shoulder as he knelt before her in the sand. He tugged off her tattered, mud-caked tennies one by one then massaged her tiny feet into new white socks and the riding boots as gently as if they were glass. Mercedes wobbled and giggled a little too loud that her tootsies were ticklish. Lucy wore the bored expression of a toll booth clerk, looking at neither me nor Charlie, her pretty lips closed tight as a cold rose.

Shannon, the true Media Queen of that pen, spied her man ogling Mercedes and reined the dun gelding close enough to block his view then motioned him aside with a sharp wave. Lance grinned big for her as if to say, "Just looking, Sweetheart," and Shannon countered with an easy smile I'd not have predicted. Their humility, when they were so clearly above us, impressed me. They had a recipe I wished I knew. Charlie watched every motion and heard every syllable as if translated it all: Coldwell kneeling, Spade guarding, Mercedes tottering, and Shannon's light scolding of Lance for leering. Tedso bore his armload of camera hardware the way a bouncer grips a bar stool.

Only Charlie, Lucy, and I acted distant from the drama, and "acted," I am more than ever convinced, was the perfect word. If I, knowing all I knew, was as stunned as a shot steer by the change in Coldwell, Lucy and Charlie had to be. The little man who thought himself so big now floundered to get Mercedes groomed and shod like a show pony. Finally Coldwell stood and squared his little shoulders, barely taller than Mercedes, each of them chin high to Spade, who

eased his arm from Mercedes' tiny bared back. And Mercedes, staring at her new red boots as if she'd just discovered her feet, stood wobbly as a new colt, giggling, whiskey breath kissing her lips as it fled. The hives had gone, the delicate skin of her neck and face now smooth and clear as the bottle of Jack that had cured her. She touched Coldwell's cheek and gazed at him moony-eyed. When she spoke, it was as if she had to peel the slow heavy words from her studded tongue.

"You bootiful man," she said, her slur thick as Charlie's scowl. She raised her other hand to his face, framing him in her hands. Spade watched without expression as if he couldn't decide what to feel. He had, after all, pimped her to Coldwell. Mercedes giggled. She lip-pecked Spade's cheek then leaned forward as if she might fall and kissed Coldwell's forehead. For the first time, Coldwell blushed. He caught Mercedes' hands and lowered them, then turned to Charlie.

"What's our next activity?" he said.

"Pictures, I reckon," Charlie said. "Aint that how this wreck started?"

As if my whiskey had erased his memory, Coldwell puzzled over the question, peered around the arena, then raised the finger of recollection.

"Cloud cover," Coldwell said. He pointed high above to the yellow fiberglass panels in the long metal roof. "Need sun."

Charlie nodded.

"Hope it happens," Charlie said. "Til then, some of us aim to throw steers. Others best steer clear."

In Charlie's pen, practice started with throwing steers from the ground before we ran any horseback, just so we could concentrate on fundamentals. Lance grabbed the top rail, jumped it, and lowered himself like a gymnast into the narrow wooden alley to tail the first steer forward to the gate. A speckled, thick-necked moose of a steer we'd named Baby Huey wedged himself forward as far as he could. Baby Huey was gentle but strong enough to bulldoze oak saplings out by their roots.

“Feelin’ virile, Big Thump?” Charlie asked. He said it deadpan without looking at me, but we all knew he wanted to see if Huey could still eat my lunch. Lucy eased Mercedes to a place ten steps safer up the pen. Shannon sat round and serene on the dun a few feet past them, seeming mildly amused by all the antics. Coldwell and Tedso hustled to ready two cameras, one on a tripod, the other on a shoulder strap. The dismal gray light that offered itself would have to do.

That moment was the first time I realized how cameras, at least cameras filming for a national audience, could change people I thought beyond change. I didn’t sense that making bulldogging or roping school tapes had changed Charlie. That was routine and for the same folks who came to his schools, anyway. No, it had to do with seeing yourself in blowed-up color on the glossy-paged magazines or maybe in TV ads such as Shannon was so used to doing and Lance was about to be. I suddenly saw in Shannon a cool distance toward it all that most of us lacked. Up until that day, I’d always credited her cool distant aura to rich roots that fed on money ten miles deep. And that was likely part of it. But seeing her in the arena as indifferent as an barn owl watching a major photo shoot caused me to wonder if fame had granted her the wisdom and grace of the nearly dead man newly resurrected by a defibrillator who says, “It’s the blinding you recall, not the light.”

I was not immune, either. Just seeing Coldwell adjust the lens made me imagine myself lashing across a full-page Cope ad. That’s the effect Coldwell and his camera had. The camera, like Lucy, seemed to be all promise, and precisely *what* it promised was no more clear. While tipsy little Coldwell planted his tripod in fairly safe dirt, Charlie schooled him in his teacherly voice.

“The key to the whole deal,” Charlie drawled, “is knowin’ when to go for the nose. Too soon, the steer won’t fall right. Too late, you’re out of the money.”

While Charlie was talking, Baby Huey shouldered the gate open and escaped with one sudden heave that surprised Lance. By rights the next steer should’ve been mine, and what a run I might’ve made for Coldwell’s camera. But when coyote Charlie saw that the next one was the

sweet little red steer we all called Day Money, he claimed him. When Charlie nodded for Lance to swing the gate, Coldwell had his camera cocked. Day Money started his dash, Charlie sprinting beside, his right arm over Day Money's shoulders. He'd schooled everybody with a thousand curses never to hang on a steer's horns before time to catch and throw one because it made steers trashy, so he raced alongside with one arm hugging Day Money's shoulders and the other pumping to keep pace with the speed. Tedso manned the stationary camera as Coldwell weaved along waving the hand-held and shrieking "Yee-haw!" When Day Money and Charlie hit full speed, Charlie yelled, "Like this!"

In one smooth move he shifted his weight onto the steer's head, kicked out his boots, and bent his knees for the slide as the steer drove forward. He snared Day Money's left antler with his left hand and shot his right arm forward until the steer's right horn was locked in the crook of his elbow. Then he bore down hard on the tip of left antler until Day Money, flexible as a slinky, gave way to the left-bound cranking. And in one fluid motion came that perfect position when the momentum and Charlie's pressure on the horns brought Day Money's nose up and to the left like a fish hooked in the corner of his mouth.

"Here it is!" Charlie yelled. He shot his left arm under Day Money's raised jaw, and heaved up on the nose as he hurled himself backward. Day Money's hooves sprayed sand when they shot skyward, and down he crashed on his side, his antlers clamped tight to Charlie's ribs. Charlie went to his back under the steer. They landed dangerously close to Coldwell, who'd either dropped to his knees — or tripped — and was still shooting as the dust coated him. Charlie shoved the steer aside, gained his feet, and dusted himself.

"That's called bulldoggin'" Charlie puffed. Coldwell whooped, leapt up, and pumped Charlie's hand.

"Majestic!" he gushed "What power!" He turned to Day Money, who'd trotted to a stop at the far end beside Baby Huey.

"How much does that steer weigh?"

One of our smallest on a pen that'd averaged five-twenty, the little steer couldn't have

topped four-fifty. But Coldwell hadn't asked me.

"Maybe six," Charlie said, his voice low. So, I thought, so . . . coyote Charlie will lie when the camera rolls.

Suddenly Spade, grinning, rode close on Mack and said something to Lance. He called to Coldwell, "Get behind that lens if ya wanna see the real deal."

"Git on the ground like ever'body else," Charlie snarled. "We'll have saddle time aplenty. This barn's got lights."

But Spade ignored him and wheeled Mack away before Charlie could snatch the bit. When Lance refused to open the gate, Spade ripped it from him. The steer squirted into the arena. Spade spurred Mack to the steer, hazing it along the plank fence. The steer lined down the fence at a long lope. It was a gray steer we called Mouse that didn't run much, so Spade's deal worked okay. Spade dropped down on him, made a smooth catch, and dunked him for the camera. Mack galloped to the far end, scattering Baby Huey and Day Money for sport. Spade hopped up and slapped his chest. Mercedes came shrieking. She raced by us to hurl herself into Spade's arms, giggling and kissing his face, her pretty clothes gathering dust. Lucy came close to me but didn't speak.

"Got to get myself that new sign," Charlie muttered. But it was Coldwell who seemed most disturbed. He walked to Charlie, whiskey heavy as hate on his breath, and asked with only a slight slur, "Mister Barnes, might I have a seat on your horse?"

Charlie stared without answering.

"Isn't that the proper etiquette and phrasing, Mister Barnes?"

"You want pictures from ahorseback?" Charlie said.

"I do not," Coldwell said, his dilated eyes hot as an iron, his thin jaw set. "I wish to wrestle a steer."

He was watching Spade's hands massage Mercedes' bared back.

"No 'fense," Charlie drawled, gentle, "but there's a .357 in the glove box of my truck, a .22 rifle behind the feed barrel in the tack room, a bottle of sleeping tablets in the night table

beside my bed, and ropes enough to hang yoreself most any d'rection you look 'round here. Why this brand of suicide?"

He needn't have asked. Even the leather eyes knotted in the lariat ropes could see the swelling jealousy threatening to explode Coldwell like helium whistling into a Valentine balloon.

"I'll increase your compensation," Coldwell said.

"Aint it," Charlie said. He looked to Tedso, but Tedso kept his gaze on Coldwell like a pit bull awaiting word. Coldwell's eighty-proof breath hovered in all our faces, but he wasn't just liquid courage. Or maybe I'd best say that the Jack wasn't the sole cause, though I allowed then and still do that a sober Coldwell would've picked a game he might could win. Charlie stepped to Coldwell and eased a hand on the little man's twitchy shoulder as he would have done to a head-shy horse. Tedso seemed to approve.

"What say we start with ground work like everybody else?"

"*He* didn't," Coldwell said, nodding toward Spade. Spade and Mercedes had caught Mack and were riding him double toward us at a walk. Mercedes sat in the saddle, carelessly dangling the reins. Spade's hands lay folded in a finger lock across her bared belly, his lips grazing her hair and neck. She was giggling like a kid on a dime pony ride. All I could think was how torn Coldwell must've felt to see that — as so often curses us all — what he most craved and most dreaded were as tangled as the arms and legs of anxious new lovers. Why he didn't try to sort Mercedes off to Hollywood and forget the whole documentary scheme, I will likely never understand. She would've gone, I will always think. But it was as if he'd imprisoned himself in his own myth. Or, as he'd more likely tell it, the myth he was meant to tell had imprisoned him. I felt so bad for little Coldwell that I offered a lame, "At least she don't act scared no more." If Coldwell heard me, he didn't show. It was as if nothing existed for him in this world beyond the girl in that dogging saddle strapped on Mack's happy old back. But then something claimed his attention.

Superstitious folks might've thought it an omen. Maybe it was. The winds had turned southerly, warming the early afternoon, and the sky cleared. As if God had spilled a bucket of

gold dust, the October sun poured bright as hope through the golden sky panels checkerboarding the long, dark tin roof. I'd never forgotten how Coldwell had gushed about those panels on his first visit. Sometimes of a sleepless night when mice scurried about my bunk I'd lain more awake than asleep and thought since about what Coldwell had said, how symbolic it was that Charlie chose gold panels. Because Coldwell had chipped at me, I'd owned it, too, that Charlie wanted guys to see gold when they looked up from the arena dirt with horns hugged to their chests. But for Coldwell they were symbolic in ways I didn't gather until later. Charlie wanted guys to see gold as payoff. But to Coldwell the golden rays were pure hope.

"*He* didn't," Coldwell repeated. He meant that Spade hadn't started practice with groundwork, and he leered at Spade as Mack quick-stepped closer.

"He's damn sure grounded now," Charlie growled. He yelled to Spade, if only to keep him at a distance, "Tie Mack yonder by the tack room and wait there." Spade flashed a give-a-damn grin, wrapped his hand around giggling Mercedes' rein hand, and nudged Mack light with a leg cue toward the rail nearest the tack room. Coldwell's eyes trailed Mercedes through that splintered light. And Charlie saw the three-pronged threat. Ragamuffin Mercedes' flaming red tresses, mascara, lip gloss, and 20X tush had blinded Coldwell quicker than any light short of the one the dead recall. Charlie seemed edgy to scold Spade, but it was as if before he could he needed to ground-tie Coldwell. He need not have worried. Coldwell had seen something more beautiful, more useful to him. There was his precious golden light, yes. But there was more. Later he'd come to tell us that the plot we hadn't know he was plotting needed a central conflict to sustain it. And when I think back I allow that was what he recognized when Charlie grounded Spade, the conflict that would sustain his plot. So there he stood, numbed a little, his boyish blue eyes lifted to the light panels, golden light beaming though floating dust.

"Found what you come for?" Charlie asked him. He studied the golden light he'd designed.

"Beyond question," Coldwell said. Charlie turned to Lance, who waited in the crowd alley, likely a tad embarrassed and thinking of reasons to flee.

“Mind havin’ Shannon gather everybody for the pics?” he asked Lance. Shannon had been plowing the dun through half-hearted lead changes on the far side of the arena, near the walk-in door, leaving us as soon as Mercedes locked on Spade and posed no threat.

“Ought to be something to see,” Lance said. He clamped a hand on the top rail, launched his lanky body over it one leg at a time as graceful as a buck then jogged toward Shannon, high-stepping in the deep sand.

“That man’s cat enough to win it all,” Charlie said, “so long as he rodeos with the right head.” As Charlie stepped past, he sent me meaningful glance of the kind that orders a dog to watch an open gate while its master tends other business. “Ya’ll camp right here til the girls are ready.”

“Mister Barnes,” Coldwell said low. He was watching Mercedes slide off Mack and into Spade’s arms. Charlie stopped mid-stride and listened.

“May I withdraw my request for a seat on your horse?”

“Ya shore may,” Charlie said. “Best concentrate on yore photo business. Light fades fast this time of year.”

Decency aside, it was in Charlie’s and my financial self-defense to keep Coldwell healthy. No pics, no pay. So when Charlie stalked off, I stayed with Coldwell and Tedso, who gathered their cameras and gear and turned as if they meant to walk away.

“The artist’s curse,” Coldwell mused. “Eternally in pursuit of the elusive light.” He recognized me as the guard dog Charlie had made me. But he seemed more interested in Charlie’s chewing of Spade by the tack room than in anything else, even in finding the perfect golden light. Across the arena, Mercedes on Mack was sandwiched now between Lucy and Shannon as they rode toward us, three queens in a too-full house. Whatever words Charlie and Spade volleyed were too low to hear from a distance, but Coldwell seemed to take their meaning. Directly, Charlie stabbed air a couple times and Spade vanished into the stairwell to the apartments. Charlie, as if winded, sat on the single wooden tack room step and stroked Topsy’s nose as she wagged her tail, brushing away the dust they’d raised.

“Paternal,” Coldwell said. “Father and Prodigal son. Yet he’s father to all, and perhaps your entire brood consists of Prodigal sons. Why hadn’t I seen that?”

“Too much else to see,” I said, watching the girls ride closer. Coldwell studied me with bright, sobering eyes, the mad lustful rush subsided. His features regained their boyishness when he saw what I saw.

“Too much else to see, indeed,” he said. “Intuitive of you, Chance. You’re a layered character.”

“Rather be plain laid,” I said low. He paused a bit as if deciding whether he need answer. The quiver of his mouth and the urgency of his next words told me that Mercedes had him no matter how he tried to convince himself otherwise.

“It’s not the lay we seek, you know. No, what we seek far surpasses the sliver of time we commit to the primitive act of copulation. Apes and asses copulate.”

“Some slivers might could last longer than others,” I said. “Some cut a tad deeper.”

“Delightfully stated,” he said, smiling, if only a twitchy smile. “You’ve a penchant for sophomoric but well-phrased humor, you know.” We walked the arena in what seemed an aimless shuffle, the girls holding the horses in a pokey walk behind us, as Coldwell studied the golden light in a dozen spots, his eyes lifted as if in prayer.

“It’s the longing that assigns meaning to love-making,” he said low. “And the promise that the longing will be fulfilled should we persevere. We men spend the first nine months of our lives freeing ourselves from the womb and the remainder attempting to re-enter. Do you wish to venture why?”

“Feels good?”

He paused and glanced at me as if I’d disappointed him, and he held that expression until another one replaced it, one that told me he’d found another way of thinking about the same thing. I allowed that he was answering the eternal question not for me, but for himself.

“More,” he said. “Ecstasy. It’s ecstasy we seek, Chance, regardless our drug of choice. Sex releases the love drug, oxytocin. Are you familiar? Its effectiveness is proportionate to our

desire. Therefore, the greater our longing for a woman, the greater the ecstasy when she shares herself. If our longing appeases mighty Aphrodite, she will bestow upon us a quantity of oxytocin potent enough to exile our loneliness, pain, grief and shame. The curse is that it's temporary, intoxicating us only until we leave our lover's bed to confront the world in the fog of our 'love hangover.' The sustainable high lies not inside the woman but inside the longing. Have you ever longed for a woman, Chance? Desired one who seemed unattainable?"

I turned to look at the girls, at Lucy astraddle a blaze-faced copper sorrel.

"Avoid gaming tables," Coldwell said. He offered a boyish smirk. "Your livelihood affords gamble enough."

Suddenly the little man stopped as if neck-roped, peeled off his lid, dropped to one bent knee, and raised his eyes to the sky light.

"Pure gold," he said. Even Tedso smiled, exposing holes where wolf teeth had been. Coldwell was right. The dust in the air there, at that moment, was not Oklahoma arena dust but floating gold. A soft, warm, yellow hue lighted our faces and clothes as if we were downwind of a paint booth. It was as eerie as watching a funnel cloud dip. Coldwell, still kneeling, called softly for Mercedes to ride close. Since nobody trusted her to ride alone, even on sweet old Mack, she rode into that eerie golden light flanked by Lucy and Shannon as if they were bridesmaids. As they closed ground, Coldwell stood, turned, and backed slowly, hand signaling them to ease forward then rein off, leaving Mercedes alone and aglow in the center of his sacred light.

"Precious perfection," Coldwell said. Mercedes stared wide-eyed, plainly nervous being left alone on Mack. Black Jack was losing his magic. Coldwell and Tedso launched into a mad flurry of setting up cameras and more lights. Lucy and I helped with gear, her expression asking me wordlessly if I sensed the almost sacred strangeness of the whole deal. Now, when I recall that moment, I see that Mercedes was the newest star in the reality Coldwell meant to stage.

"Mister Coldwell?" Mercedes said. She seemed more frightened each second.

"Yes, Love?" he said. "Please call me Justin."

“I gotta go pee.”

Coldwell darted to her, placed his hand on her thigh, and promised her he'd personally tend her needs. He eased the reins from her hand, turned Mack gently around, and led him toward the downstairs john beside the tack room. I told myself if anybody were to write a play beginning with the little scene I'd witnessed, Mercedes' character would about have to be named Longing. But seeing the expressions Lucy and Shannon traded, watching Charlie slowly pack a fresh chew on the tack room step, and remembering that Spade might trot down the stairs any time, I couldn't decide if it'd be comedy or drama.

Chapter Fifteen

The next morning, his Longing long gone, Coldwell seemed hollow and beaten as a drum. He eased silent as a shadow into the barn while I was feeding, his clothes as crumpled as his hair, a day's dirty blond stubble darkening his cheeks.

"You look like you slept cuffed to the blades of a windmill," I said. Arms folded inside his jacket sleeves, he leaned against a stall gate, pondered a minute, then spoke through a sad little smile that barely hinted of the boyish wonder he normally bore.

"How appropriately quixotic," he said.

The little man had cause aplenty to get on a first-name basis with grief. The night before, Shannon had announced that she wouldn't have her face marketing Mercedes' butt, which meant no money for any of us. It also likely meant that Coldwell had lost credibility with Wrangler.

"Christ my Savior doesn't approve deception," Shannon said before she stepped into her shiny bus. She said she'd prayed on it. Lance slouched in the driver's seat of the idling bus, holding the donut and looking so whipped it was hard to imagine him finishing his run at the NFR. By then we all understood why he'd eased Charlie into the tack room for a closed-door talk before Shannon went public. I imagined Charlie saying, "Be careful which head does yore thinkin, Son." I even suspected Lance had offered to cover the lost profit as Charlie pinched every lip muscle he owned to spit the word, "No." But by the time they loaded the bus, the set of Charlie's jaw said he was right with Lance's first loyalty being to Shannon. Little Coldwell, always the gentleman, had gripped hands on the bus step with Shannon as she said, "Christ wouldn't approve the deception."

"When the God closes a door," Coldwell countered, "he opens a window. Meeting the royalty of 'Cowboy Camelot' has been blessing enough. Perhaps we'll have another opportunity." We all saw the tears raining through his twitchy little smile.

"Lord helps he who helps hisself," Charlie muttered. Eve and Delilah had to be camped in the front seat of his thinking.

The only window God opened for Coldwell was the one that made him watch Longing

co-pilot Spade's truck from his lap as they drove off for Tulsa in the night. Through that same pane in the glow of the dome light she blew the little guy a kiss and waved. Just as he raised his little hand to return the kiss, Mercedes pounced on Spade and kissed him so crazy he like to swerved into Charlie's rickety yard fence, horn blaring.

"As if we needed proof either of them was horny," Lucy deadpanned.

Earlier, she and I had renewed our vow never to love one another. Within the hour hers became the third set of tail lights leaving the chilled night to Coldwell, Charlie, and me. Tedso had vanished to destinations unknown for reasons unnamed, so it was just the three of us standing under the amber pole light outside Charlie's house while Elena scraped plates in the kitchen. Squeaky little dogs in the puppy mill next door yapped shrilly to the beat of Chicano music from the trailer park.

"The sun'll brighten things," Charlie said. "Sometimes the best thing a man can do in darkness is sleep."

So we'd slept, or at least we'd tried. Charlie had gone to his bed, Coldwell to the 'partment Charlie loaned him, and I to mine. I lay awake aching for Lucy and fighting a fierce urge to call or, worse, follow her back to school. Like any other unhealed hurt, Lonesome lays fairly quiet until someone rips off the scab. I thought of Lucy. I thought of my ex-sweet-little-rich girl. I even thought about driving to Tulsa and finding a girl, any girl, to share a pillow. Then I told myself there'd be buckle bunnies aplenty when I cracked out next spring for a run at the world. Girls now would just get between me and my goals. I scolded myself for letting the wrong head do my thinking. But when I thought of Lucy, I confessed that it wasn't either head. She'd homesteaded in my heart. And I'd damn sure best find a way to evict her. Sometime long past late-thirty Coldwell crept from his room and eased down the stairs. Wondering which of us was in the worse shape, I mercifully lost consciousness without knowing if he'd ever gone back to bed.

Now it was morning, and he was holding up a stall wall. Might we, he asked polite as always, ride the For Sale: Will Divide bluestem meadow across the blacktop from Charlie's

place. I asked if he had a special reason. His burned-out eyes rekindled their boyish blue glow.

“Consider it lunacy if you wish, Chance, but last night while walking the pastures I underwent a vision. A voice told me to journey to the mecca, where I would discover my new muse.”

“Got any of those shrooms left?” I said.

“I wouldn’t believe me, either,” he said. “I’ve been seized with an inexplicable urge to absorb.”

“Absorb what?”

“The vision has yet to disclose.”

“If you get in this shape over one blowed deal and one night’s lost sleep, you ought never step in a rodeo rig,” I said.

“You forget,” he said. I had.

“Longing?” I said. And his expression said he knew I was as bloated with longing as he was. We looked away from each other, whether from respect or shame I still can’t say. After a bit I allowed that since I needed to work a colt anyway, he may as well come with. Truth was, I felt happy for company. Misery loves. I saddled Speedy, an ancient palomino stick with arthritic knees who was, as Charlie put it, too lazy to chew. He’d been Lucy’s first horse.

We set out in an easy trot, the colt springing along on pogo-stick legs as we left Charlie’s lane and crossed the blacktop. When we rode into the shadow of the sign, Coldwell reined Speedy around and faced Charlie’s “West,” a twenty-acre cowboy remnant enclosed by the puppy mill, meth-making trailer park, and huge oil-slicked barrels. He sat there a good bit in odd silence, his little hands resting on the saddle horn.

A band of geese honked into range low overhead in a southbound V, their bellies white as clouds, their shrieks calling Coldwell from his trance. He cupped a hand above his eyes and gazed at the geese against their purple-cloud backdrop like a boy seeing his first bird. All around the long, low purple cloud bank, the warm October sun was tightening the land after all the rains. The geese broke from the clouds, the leaders veeing into the sun, their shadows pumping so close

beside us that the colt I was riding spun circles and slung his head, wanting to buck. Coldwell didn't notice, his eyes were so full of sky.

"How poetic," he said. "Are you aware, Chance, that there are those who believe geese embody the soul?"

"There are those who believe they're damn fine baked," I said. The colt humped in place, stiff-necked and ripping at the bit. "And others who think all they do is shit on everything they don't eat or scratch."

When Coldwell lowered his eyes, he still seemed to think my little tussle unworthy of comment, which surprised me and peeved me. I couldn't have known how far past the present his boyish blue eyes were already focused.

"Do you dislike me on principle?" he asked. "Or can you name the offense I committed?"

"Neither," I said. "It was a joke."

The colt was squealing and crow-hopping now, and I was ripping at the left rein to bring his head around before he really got rolling. When I got the colt's head lifted, he came out of his crow-hop, slung his nose, and pawed at sky with his front hooves like he meant to flip over backwards, which he'd done the week before. I stayed light in case I had to bail. Finally he set all four feet down and stood there quivering. The day before, Coldwell would've filmed every jump. Now it wasn't worthy of his tape recorder. He eased from the saddle and knelt on both knees, his face still skyward as if looking for geese or praying. It was as if the little dude actually believed the vision would find him there. And maybe it did. After maybe ten minutes on his knees, hands clasped in front of him, without a word he gained his feet and swung back on Speedy.

"I've a proposal for you," he said.

"I'm marriage shy," I said. I was braced for the colt's next trick. "You might could ask Spade."

"I believe your Arena Gods as you call them have ordained me to make a documentary film," he said. "I have been delivered to you for that purpose."

"I just want to rodeo," I said. "That, and stay astraddle this colt."

“Precisely,” Coldwell said. He talked faster now, the real Coldwell reclaiming his little body. “That is the film’s foundation. No image is more iconic in the American imagination than the cowboy. Please accept my apology in advance for not having done my research, but might you inform me if such films have been made? Of real cowboys, I mean, men like you who live it?”

“Lots of ‘em,” I said. “Seldom anybody gets it right. Best one was *Rank*, about PBR bull riders, but it was rare. More times than not they lapse into that hokey Hollywood crap. Filmmakers go for green,” I said. “Not truth.”

Coldwell faced Charlie’s place again, the huge barn that dwarfed the little shotgun house, the pens where steers and horses loafed, the tall cedar break so green it was almost black. And framing it at a distance were the yapping puppy mill, the greasy oil storage tanks, and the sway-backed trailers populated by low-rider thugs who allegedly made meth.

“Mister Barnes’ ranch,” Coldwell said as if twenty acres made a ranch, “and the West it perpetuates, are not lessened by encroaching history, Chance. Rather, the power of the myth is multiplied by its unyielding durability. I’ve heard you speak of stubborn horses as ‘iron-jawed.’ That seems to me an accurate descriptor of cowboy spirit in general. It is that spirit I wish to capture on film, complicated and contradictory though it may be.”

Coldwell had regained his most magnetic, passionate, and sincere self, even if he was deceiving himself in ways he did not yet know.

“You’re really caught up in this, aint ya?” I said.

“That amuses you? Am I the first to be intrigued by this life?”

“You’d be takin’ on one tough chore,” I said. “Few folks really *get* it.

“Perhaps I must confess that I among the number who does not,” he said. “What, precisely, *is* the attraction? Your only guarantees are that you’ll pay your own fees and often be injured. In what you term a good year, you spend more than you make. In a great year you barely net what the lowliest journeyman earns in all other sports. Try as I have, I can’t comprehend.”

“That’s cause you’re not cowboy,” I said. I asked if he’d ever tried sports.

“Tennis,” he said. “Swimming. Cross country. All in high school. Tried fencing in college.”

“Ever win?” I asked.

“So infrequently my desire deserted me.”

The colt threw another little sideshow that lasted until the last goose dragged his honking shadow from sight. For a short bit afterward, I asked the colt to stand still, which he more or less did.

“What do you teach him by making him stand?” Coldwell said.

“That I can. For a horse to be useful, he has to know he’s not in charge. Beyond that, I’m teachin’ him to be calm, outside and inside.”

“Seems comparable to Mister Barnes’ treatment of his protégés.”

“Same deal,” I said. “He don’t hide it none.”

“Even if I were capable of your work,” Coldwell said, “I would not do it. I would not jeopardize my health and future for your wages.”

“Some wages aint money,” I said.

“Will you not take offense, Chance, if I ask you a question?”

“Try not.”

“I’ll rephrase,” he said, lightening his words with an airy boyish smile. But his tone and the shrewd set of his eyes warned me that he was drilling deeper than his words showed. “Will you answer honestly, please, even if my questions anger you?”

I shrugged. The colt needed to stand a while longer, anyway, and I needn’t worry about Coldwell because standing was what Speedy did best, next to lying down. The only way he’d hurt Coldwell would be if he slept on him.

“You’re a college graduate, your degree in agri-journalism, I believe. Correct?”

“That supposed to piss me off?”

I patted the colt’s lathered neck and wondered what new mischief roamed his runaway brain.

“That’s mere preparation for my question, which is this: Are you familiar with code-switching? Using one language dialect with one group, a different dialect with another?”

“It must’ve been covered in some course. Can’t recall.”

“I ask because voice is a key component of acting. As a film maker, I’m intrigued by all elements of performance. Real or fictional — as if one could prove a difference.”

I didn’t answer.

“Have I offended you?”

“Just listenin’,” I said, which was the truth.

“Characters fascinate me,” he said. “We’re all characters in our own drama, the ‘I’ of our dramas, if you will, and typically heroic in our re-presentation of our selves.”

He was deliberate in his pause between the words: *our* and *selves*, which set me thinking in new ways.

“But we also *play* characters that we create to pacify our imaginations, or else to fill the void for characters who don’t exist but whom we wish into being.”

“You seem naturally blessed with the last,” I said. He’d meant to tack Mercedes’ butt on Shannon, hadn’t he? And to deny Mercedes’ horse-phobia. When I touched the colt into a walk, Speedy plodded behind, nose to tail like a circus elephant. I stayed on the ready in case quail exploded from that bluestem under the colt’s legs.

“Perhaps,” Coldwell said. He seemed not to be arguing or insisting, merely schooling me.

“Myself aside, I’ve observed that you *do* drop easily into character,” he said. “Out here you’re not Chance Hendrix, next in line for his family farm. Nor are you Chance Hendrix, university-educated journalist who could be keying in stories at an ag journal this moment. Out here you’re ‘Big Thump,’ a mythology created by your own bravado and perpetuated by Mister Barnes. Yet he can’t do it without your complicity to embrace and celebrate your created self. So you mimic his Okie speech pattern, which isn’t native to you at all.”

“If my talk don’t suit you,” I said, “we can ride quiet.”

“It can’t be simplified to pleasing or displeasing, Chance.”

“Pleases you plenty to yack about it,” I said.

“Professional interest. Characters are to filmmakers and actors what horses are to cowboys. They carry them. What I’m explaining is central to character. Aren’t you interested in how we create our selves? Do you know the term ‘alter ego,’ the second self?”

I told him I did.

“Did you ever ask yourself how an Iowa boy named Marion Michael Morrison — a Midwesterner such as yourself — evolved into John Wayne? Who was the legend, really, the fictional Wayne or the real Morrison?”

“Your mind sure enough hauls through strange country,” I said. But his crazy enthusiasm and the rightness of his “Big Thump” notions unnerved me.

“*American* country,” he said, almost desperate now. “Are you aware that millions of immigrants changed their names?”

He stammered at an auctioneer’s pace how Europeans, Russians, and even Brits had clipped or altered their names’ spelling to Americanize themselves. His excitement somehow sparked old Speedy into a stiff trot that brought him even with the colt. Coldwell’s little hands, sawing the beginnings and endings off long Slavic names, fluttered fast enough to prick up the colt’s skittish ears. I asked if he might could steady himself before the colt blew again.

“Let us return to my proposal,” he said, calmer but not calm. “Who is the real American cowboy today?”

“What am I?” I said.

“Precisely my question,” he said. “Now, would you call me a cowboy?”

“Would you think me honest if I did?”

“I wouldn’t permit it,” he said. “My point, however, has to do with language as barrier, dividing your selves, all the Chance Hendrixes you might be, from one another — and from outsiders. You use language to isolate yourself from select persons, such as myself, and to ingratiate yourself with others, such as Mister Barnes. You didn’t learn your ‘Okie’ accent in northwest Missouri.”

“Wouldn’t be an Okie accent if I had, would it?”

“Precisely. You deliberately, if subconsciously, use different diction to alienate me. You drop the concluding ‘g’ from your words to identify yourself with a certain speech community that excludes me. It’s similar to dressing differently for different occasions with different groups of people, all of whom you identify with in different ways. The groups, however, are mutually exclusive. You can’t be in two at once. You know I’ll never be ‘one of you.’ So rather than choose to speak with me as one educated man to another — I’m a UCLA film school alumnus, by the way, class of ‘95, Summa Cum Laude — in the trained English that earned you a journalism degree, you switch to ‘cowboy,’ thereby announcing your loyalty with a subtle, or perhaps not-so-subtle, linguistic switch. You tell me in vernacular that I am not ‘one of you’ because I can’t be, and you won’t join my community because you choose not to. Am I mistaken?”

“Never thought about it,” I said. And that, like any truth on its way to becoming a lie, was true when I told it.

“Returning to my proposal,” he said, “I’m willing to invest time and money in filming you, Spade, Mister Barnes, whoever wishes to participate. You say no one ever gets it right. What would ‘getting it right’ entail?”

“How we live,” I said. “Who we are. How we think. How we eat, breathe,shit. What we crave, read, drink, ride, pray. What we’ll do to get what we want. And what we’ll do with it when we get it.”

“Pure cowboy,” he said, beaming. He’d flipped out his tape recorder and captured it all. “Understated monosyllabic eloquence.”

It gave me a smug pride I hadn’t expected that I could define Coldwell’s fancy words. I was proud, too, that he understood I could talk and think like a university graduate. Truth was, he made me want to dust off some nickel words I’d learned and volley them with him, though we both knew I wouldn’t because it would be out of character. He’d made me see that I was in character as my self. Whatever his lethal shortcomings, he, like Charlie, owned

the talent for seeing inside people and situations. And like Charlie --- hell, like all of us --- he meant to convert his talent to cash.

Coldwell patted Speedy's neck as we rode on. He raised his boyish face and blue eyes to the sky as if again hearing geese. He stared at the sky a good bit, and when he looked at me again he wore the expression of a suitor on the verge of proposing to a fickle girl he already knew would say, *I'll need time to think on it*, then spend the rest of her life pretending she hadn't decided.

"Do you think, hypothetically I'm speaking, that Charlie and the others would be interested in having their lives chronicled on film? I'm speaking of *everyone*," he said, meaning Mercedes. "To, as you word it, 'get it right'."

"Aint for me to say."

"All right then, Chance 'Big Thump' Hendrix, please allow me to rephrase the question. Would *you* be willing to have your life chronicled and broadcast so all the world could follow your cowboy dreams with you? How may I offer to get it any more right than that?"

"Can't," I said. "If you tell it true to us and not change one thing to satisfy anybody's glorified movie notion of what cowboys are."

"You're agreeing to it?"

"Pay?"

"I can't promise," he said. He let go a long breath. "I'd need to pitch the project to some connections I have, people on the coast."

"Guess I can't promise either," I said.

"You would profit handsomely," he said. Mocking my Okie accent, he fired back the line I'd given him: "Some wages aint money."

I had to grin.

"Wait and see," I said. "Charlie's call."

But the trouble was, I could see it already. I could see myself on camera, people from all around the world watching me soar from anonymity to fame. But in that For Sale: Will Divide

bluestem meadow, astraddle a knot-headed colt, I couldn't have foreseen what Coldwell was really asking, or would ask of us. I'm not sure he knew. I was fairly sure I'd watched the idea snake itself from behind his eyes to his tongue. And if I had, it meant he'd already forgotten his failed subjects of Lance and Shannon and instead envisioned in Charlie, Spade, Lucy, Mercedes, and — to a lesser degree in me — the eternal yet evasive promise of a West that no one else had seen or may ever see because it was his alone.

Coldwell's original vision, I still believe, was never as dark as the media reported it. He was, if nothing else, optimistic. He told us all that his vision "merely capitalized on the great American hunger for stories of pluck and luck." Lucy later allowed to Charlie and me, bitterly, that he stopped short of the other rhyming word he was really marketing.

"Only romantics and idiots place credence in love at first sight," he told me. His little boy shine had dimmed, maybe from the whiskey fade. "Which am I?"

The question whisked my mind completely afield of him and into my own deal with Lucy. I allowed he didn't expect an answer. But whatever the answer was, we shared it like a brotherly curse.

Chapter Sixteen

Charlie's barn brooded beneath the brand of loneliness that settles on a vacated rodeo grounds when the wind drives the last styrofoam beer cup into a grader ditch. It was early November, bedtime, and I was alone in my 'partment, crashed on my bed in my skivvies, too beat for sleep, and trying futilely to recall the last time I'd felt that lonely. It wasn't about Lucy. We talked often enough by phone to keep hope alive yet seldom enough to leave it hungry.

"Our goals come first," she'd say soft as pill-bottle cotton. And, in varying words, she'd say, "Relationships built on resentment can't stand. You didn't end your other relationships just to quit rodeo over me. I lack the arches to do the barefoot-and-pregnant thing. We'd devour one another like flames, Chance, and you know what that would leave?"

"Smoke? Ashes?"

"And a new chill," she'd say. "Even colder after the heat leaves."

We ended each of our rare calls with a renewal of our vows never to love one another.

I sometimes allowed that if I was bent on ending loneliness, I'd ought to call my ex-sweet little rich girl and ask how happy she was with her new man. Several times that fall I'd scrolled up her number and came within a key stroke of slashing open the past. I carried like a crumpled pocket photo my memories of her and that white-pipe-fence ranch where we could've been living. But, sweet and good though she was, I knew I'd wake up one day hating her and our kids for the sick feeling that I'd missed something. The something was called rodeo. And that logic led me to know the particular brand of loneliness I felt that night.

It was the dumped-pup numbness of understanding too late that those shrinking red tail lights in the distance mean your ride left without you. That kind of lonely. Charlie, Spade, and Lance were rodeoing hard with the NFR barely a month away. Coldwell and Tedso had vanished for a couple weeks to shoot some mysterious project. I was the left-behind chore boy. The wind moaned. The barn creaked. And all I wanted was to catch me a handful of gone. I ached to be in the rig, on the road, at a rodeo with packed stands. I ached to be somewhere and to be somebody. I ached for it so bad it would've felt right just to throw back my head and howl. I was, as Charlie

phrased the mental anguish of nerve-lathered horses learning to handle pressure, “Goin’ through the sweat.”

Restless, I moved camp from my bed to the old cigarette-scarred leather couch I’d covered with horse blankets. Lucy giggled me once that my furniture could best be described as “nouveau garage sale,” but furniture meant nothing more to me than separation from the floor. On my ratty couch I fidgeted and tried to concentrate on the newest *PRCA Sports News*. All that did was remind me who and where I wasn’t. I snagged the girlie mags I kept hidden under the couch cushions. But whatever haunted me uglified my favorite girls so bad I tucked them back inside their glossy sheets and put them back to bed. Outside, the hollow November wind kept moaning in the gnarled cedars. Usually that wind lulled me to sleep as sweetly as the sound of rumbling tailpipes in a camper bed on the highway between rodeos, but not that night. I dove from the couch to my recliner and gathered up the TV remote.

I replayed the most recent video Charlie had taped of me bulldogging, complete with a voiceover of Charlie afterward critiquing the tiniest twitch of every run from nod to dust-off as if he were sitting on the couch next to me. Such tapes, to Charlie’s thinking, were textbooks to be studied and memorized. Charlie teased out each answer with a question, even on tape. His gravelly Okie voice drawled from the TV while the camera watched me in the dogging box riding Beggar. Charlie was in the hazing box on a white horse named Casper, and Spade sat atop the chute, poised to trip the gate when I nodded.

“Now on this yeller steer yore ‘bout to run, Big Thump, what lead ought he break in?” He scolded me for nodding while the steer was standing in the wrong lead. That mistake meant the steer’s momentum would be carrying him to the right when I caught him, which was the opposite of Charlie’s mantra that everything needed to go, “Left! Left! Left! Steer wrestling is all about left.”

With film he made me see how I looked to other people, even how I looked to the steers and horses.

“A man who sees himself only through the eye of his ego tends to get an inflated opinion

of his ‘bilities. Camera lets a little air out.”

So it seemed natural enough that hearing Charlie’s camera talk drove my thinking to Coldwell’s proposal, and I wasn’t still sure what to think. I channel-surfed my way to a show about Phantom Limb Syndrome, where the host, some slick, silver-haired guy who played a doctor on TV, was interviewing a series of amputees. One plump little diabetic granny with huge glasses dangling from a neck chain allowed that after three years she could still feel a needle prick her missing hand as she embroidered. When the host challenged her to describe the pain in more detail, she tapped her chrome hook as rapidly as a sewing machine needle on his hand. “Prick prick prick prick prick prick,” she screeched. “Know how it feels now?” Doctor TV’s face flared red as brake lights.

A wiry young one-legged black belt swore he’d been sober the day he high-swung his heavy punching bag and side-thrust kicked it on the come with his only leg. He forgot he’d removed his prosthetic leg for cleaning. He’d braced on his phantom limb to drive home the kick, he said, and only remembered when his head cracked the floor that he didn’t have a leg to stand on. The announcer groaned. The guy puked one of those pained guffaws that gets people twenty-four hours in Observation. On the E Channel an invisible interviewer asked Hef’s bunnies the kinds of mindless questions that spawn new blonde jokes. When the Playboy mansion hot-tub scene broke for a Viagra commercial, I surfed to CMT’s *Cowboy U* and gagged at the so-called “events” of actors posing as cowboys. Entertainment, it might’ve been. Cowboy, it wasn’t. *U* wasn’t I. Leave us to hope, I told myself, that Coldwell gets it right, though that night I wasn’t sure why I cared. I’d worked my way into Charlie’s barn meaning to make a run at the world. What did Coldwell and his camera have to do with that? I was bulldogging better than I ever had. Charlie had hinted often that I might be ready sooner than he’d allowed. I ought to have been happy. But, like a horse sensing the menace beyond the blue sky, I felt a building storm.

I switched the TV off, dressed, and went into the cold night, thinking I might could use a beer or twelve in town. But the trouble with that mountain-spring mood medicine, I’d learned in

college, is that it mortgages the next morning so heavily about all a man gets done is working off his debt. So I was happy to see the cheery light glowing from Charlie's kitchen window, which meant Elena was still awake.

Most days I worked from six in the morning until eight at night. I'd feed early, muck stalls, and saddle the first horses. Mid-morning I'd feast on whatever Elena had made, skip lunch, then drag my weary carcass back to Elena's kitchen after I'd tended the last horse. Elena might have rice and chicken on the stove or nuke-ready burritos in the fridge, always something fresh that day and tasty. In my room I kept a rank fridge with snacks and a microwave on a three-legged table that relied on the junction of two walls to serve as its fourth leg. But Elena's cooking, even cold or nuked, was special enough I never minded the walk to the house, no matter the weather.

Sometimes she'd be in her little room off the kitchen, the soft blue light of the TV screen leaking the shifting shadow of some heaven-sent-via-satellite Mexican televangelist around the closed door. If I didn't make it before her bedtime, candlelight typically flickered through the door cracks. She'd be speaking low and humble, the husky whisper of a woman past her change, as if praying, always in Spanish, and I felt holy in her presence. But sometimes of an evening if the moon hung just right she could be talkative, especially if Charlie'd been on the road a good bit. She'd straighten my collar and scold me to wash my hands as she warmed the food and prattled on. She'd talk about her family that her wages fed back in Mexico. She'd ask about the horses and cattle that she never came near. If she felt playful, she'd tease me about girls, marriage, and family. That's how she began when I walked in that lonely night.

"So, are you and Miss Lucy engaged yet?" she said, her accent heavy. She wore faded jeans and a red checkered blouse that hung loose on her. She'd freed her long gray hair from its bun, letting it sweep her shoulders as she worked. She kept her eyes on the black beans she was stirring. In the living room, a happy flame swayed behind the glass doors of the wood stove and partially lit the room in its glow. It felt right to take a little pleasure from the wood I'd cut and split. Were Lucy and I engaged, she asked again.

“In what?” I joked. Her English being limited, Elena didn’t always get jokes.

“Que?” she said, turning. “What?”

“No wife for me,” I said. “Least ways not before I win the world.” She crossed herself and raised her deep soft eyes dramatically to the ceiling, draping a wave of long gray hair down her shoulders. I plopped in my usual chair at Charlie’s converted work bench of a table, comforted by Elena’s presence and the fire. The lonely feeling had quit me at the door.

“Siempre el mundo,” she said, scolding in Spanglish. “Always the world para you vacqueros de rodeo. Why don’t you see that love is the greatest blessing? Especially the love of God? Next to Divine love comes that of a good woman. Lucinda is good. I know her heart.”

“How long?” I said. She seemed puzzled. “Quantos anos?” I said. How many years? I wondered if she’d known Lucy before the wreck that killed Evan.

She held up both hands, fingers and thumbs outstretched. That calculated to a year before the wreck. Someday, I told myself, I’d ask more.

“Married to rodeo,” I said. “Highway for a home.”

“Better that you’d have become a priest,” she said, stirring two pots at once. She lectured me in Spanglish. “You’re not like that devil Spade, El Diablo, hombre del fuego.” She nodded toward the fire in the wood stove. “Not neither like that loco chameleon de la camera, Coldwell. Ni no esta El Lobo, the wolf, como Charlie. Tiene un corazon bueno,” she said. She turned from the gas burners and patted my shirt pocket tenderly. “Tiene corazon bueno. You have a good heart, Chance Hendrix.”

“I’m sin itself,” I said. She liked to be teased, if she got the joke.

“You are God’s golden child,” she said. She lifted off my lid and petted my hair in slow long strokes back to front as if I were her lap dog. “Beautiful as a saint.”

“Only gold I need is in my buckle,” I said. She turned back to the stove.

“Estoy preocupado con todos ellos,” she said. “Can you not see that Coldwell’s camera contains el ojo de Satan?” Satan’s eyes, she meant.

I laughed. She palmed the back of my head hard. A mouse zipped from behind the fridge

toward the living room, where Charlie's big brindle tomcat, E.Z., pounced from Charlie's easy chair and pinned it, shrieking, to the dirty brown carpet. E.Z. glared into the mouse's eyes without biting.

"You are that mouse," Elena said. "Coldwell is el gato, the cat."

"Do you know the word 'melodramatic'?" I asked.

She scowled as she always did when she sensed condescension.

"I know evil," she said. "That chameleon who calls himself Coldwell comes in many forms. Como Diablo. I listen. I see. I feel. I pray. I know. I tell you truth, Chance. Hear me. Spade is the evil that's easy to see. He is beast of his flesh, bold and macho as the strutting cock or the rearing stallion, all teeth and hooves and sinews that takes whatever feeds his lust. But Coldwell is a house of mirrors, all facing out, so that when you see him you see only yourself as he sees you. There is no 'he.' He was born without a self, and so to exist he steals one. I have known men like him. Doom is his destiny, but he never departs alone."

Such times she made me suspect that dead chickens and mojo bones dangled from a blood-crusting nail behind the big painting of the crucifixion she kept above her bed. She lowered a metal plate of steaming beans, rice, and soft-shell tacos to the table for me, then slapped my hand as I knew she would when I reached for my fork.

"First we pray," she said. "Give thanks for our blessings."

"Si, mi madre," I said.

"Do you know what today is?" she asked. She'd seated herself and folded her hands on the table for prayer.

"Wednesday?"

"All Souls' Day. We must pray for all."

She squeezed my hands in hers and held them with a surprising power that brought me surprising comfort.

"Pray with me," she said. Her tone left no option. She began the Lord's Prayer in Spanish, which she'd taught me. I followed.

“Nuestra padre en el cielo significado”

A wind gust in the chimney caused the flame to flare in the stove, the flash of light so bright I opened my eyes to be sure the stove doors were shut. While Elena prayed, the flame roared again. The cat’s head dropped, followed by a death screech and the gruesome crunch of teeth crushing bones. When the cat turned to me, his yellow-green eyes glowed hot as the flame that filled them. Blood trickled from his teeth. Elena, her eyes saying *I told you so*, muttered her amen and squeezed my hands, her cue.

“Amen,” I said. “Dear God, Amen.”

Chapter Seventeen

Coldwell started filming the documentary just before Charlie's next steer wrestling clinic, a three-day deal on Thanksgiving weekend. If it was real he sought, it was real he got. On Sunday the pot-belly eighteen-wheeler rumbled up the narrow lane carrying an eighty count of high-headed Mexican bulldogging steers Charlie had leased from a shady trader near San Angelo. The rig's chrome stacks gleamed, and the big Cummins purred while 320 hooves clamored for footholds on the shitty aluminum flooring. Coldwell filmed the rig's entrance up the gravel lane with a tripod camera set in Charlie's yard, then trailed along to film the unloading in the arena.

Charlie, Spade, and I waited at the arena gates. A few other guys were due to join us by noon, guys who Charlie had promised a reduced rate and extra practice if they'd come help beforehand. Help, we'd need aplenty. Charlie expected us to throw each of the eighty fresh steers at least three times, twice from the ground and once from a horse. That meant a total of 240 runs. If Charlie helped, and if the two new guys matched us steer for steer, that still left forty-eight runs each on wild, fresh cattle that hadn't seen a man up close since calfhood castration and branding.

Like any animal, steers have to be trained. They have to learn what a chute is, how to leave it, where to go after they've been caught and released, and — most of all — what the guy who snatches their horns aims to do and not do to them. Savvy old dogging steers that have been caught and throwed a lot can get docile as poodles to handle until the chute opens. They know the game, though some are better to play than others. But to wild steers fresh off the high desert, any man who jumps on them may as well be a cougar with claws in their spines, and they'll sure enough fight as if he is. Nobody knew that better than Charlie. So in coyote little sideways glances he watched Spade and me for signs of dread. As the rig creaked closer, he spat his spent Cope and packed a fresh one in his lip, his ritual slow and studied.

“Cravin' cattle, boys?”

“Since the womb,” Spade said. He puffed his chest at Coldwell's camera then packed a

fresh chew from the Cope Charlie offered him. They'd stopped teasing me about my tobacco intolerance that left me clammy and flattened every time I'd packed a dip.

As for the abuse we were about to take, it wasn't as if we needed eighty steers for the school or even for ourselves. Half that many would've been twice what we needed. No, we were about to take a royal cow-killing so Charlie could mark up the other half of the herd in a sublease to some mystery guy — Charlie knew lots of mystery guys — who contracted rodeo cattle in Arkansas. That guy had scheduled a major jackpot for the same weekend as Charlie's and insisted the steers have three catch-and-throws on them before he'd send the truck. Charlie had told us that much, though he kept the mark-up quiet. We both suspected the half he'd subleased would pay the lease on the whole bunch, leaving Charlie to use steers for free.

"What say ya put us on percentage?" Spade asked. The big rig creaked back, hooves still clamoring for toeholds inside so loudly I barely heard Spade. The cold air reeked of diesel fumes and hot cattle. Coldwell and Tedso positioned themselves, Coldwell's camera on us, Tedso's on the unloading chute where the steers would appear. I hadn't thought the camera would bother me, but it did, though I couldn't have said why. Now Spade had asked publicly for a percentage.

"Shore," Charlie said. "Five of us, we each throw twenty percent of the steers."

"Of the mark-up," Spade said, knowing he needn't. But Spade said it to the camera, as if *for* the camera, his words and expression exaggerated. "A little profit sharing?"

Charlie shook his head sideways.

"Overhead's killin' me," he said. He acted wary, as if IRS auditors might inspect the footage. "xpenses terrible. Lights. Water. Fuel. Feed. Vet. Labor."

"Labor?" Spade said before I could. He snorted, grinned, and slugged my shoulder.

"I'm cuttin' those other guys' fees by half for helpin'," Charlie said. "That's \$500 I'm out. B'sides, a steer dies, I own it. Ya'll know that. Much as I wish I could do more, boys, so long as the risk's all mine, the tiny profits ought to be. Fair enough?"

Coldwell and Tedso moved around, filming. The rig rocked backwards over the frozen ruts, metal creaking, engine snarling, hooves scrambling, until it bumped the borrowed loading

chute we'd chained to a barn pole. Air brakes hissed. The hefty driver stepped down and plodded toward us, hitching his jeans up their red suspenders as he came. Coldwell had made his way to the cab and now backpedaled ahead of driver with the camera filming. The driver, puzzled, popped his long stock whip at the frozen ground as he walked, watching Coldwell.

"Hope ya'll got walls enough to hold a griz," he said.

"Walls enough and balls enough," Spade said. "Bring 'em."

Coldwell spun the camera to Spade and asked him to repeat his boast, which Spade did.

"No," Coldwell coached. "Face the driver when you say it." So they shot it again, Spade less playful, more menacing, as in the 'get-out-of-town-by sundown' line.

"Walls enough and balls enough," Spade said, gruff B-movie theatrics.

The driver studied Spade, seemed to answer a question without asking it, and ratcheted open the tall aluminum tail gate with a rope run through a pulley. The first steer poked out his horns, saw us, whirled, and reared back inside the trailer, slinging shit as he clawed for traction. Some of it splattered the cameras. Coldwell dabbed at the shit with his handkerchief and scrunched his face.

"You wanted the real shit," Charlie said.

"Best give 'em air," the driver said. We all eased out of their sight line. The next steer, a big, wide-horned, rust-colored brute, reared from the trailer onto the loading chute, his front hooves almost as high as his airborne jaw, and skidded down on his bony butt. The steers behind him thundered out of trailer with a godawful racket and tore across the arena, pin-balling off the walls, stampeding the length and width of the pen time and again, shrouding themselves in their own dust storm. Boards popped. Horns and hooves screeched along metal siding. Dust rolled so thick that we couldn't see whether the walls held.

"Forgot that these dirty bad bastards never seen a barn," Charlie drawled, his big voice barely carrying. "Might out to've unloaded them outside and eased 'em in at night, ya know." Coldwell, ruddy-cheeked in the cold and gleeful as a kid, taped him.

When the last steer had clattered down the chute, the trucker came to Charlie, grinning a

big, tobacco-stained grin, and presented the ticket. Coldwell wedged in for a close-up. Charlie pulled out his checkbook and a pen, aiming to write against the loading chute. He tipped back his old silver-belly, put on his glasses, and studied the bill.

“Aint what we agreed,” Charlie said. He spat. The trucker stopped grinning and snapped his whip hard on the frozen ground. He looked hard at Charlie. Spade stepped around me and moved tight against the trucker, his eyes fired as a flint. When the trucker nodded curiously at Coldwell, Charlie explained his presence, which seemed to make the trucker even more uneasy than Spade’s eyes. Coldwell rotated the camera from Spade to Charlie to Trucker.

“It’s the bill the man sent,” Trucker said, eyeing everybody. “’tween you cattle barons. No skin offen my ass.”

Charlie folded the ticket and stuffed it in the unbuttoned left shirt pocket of Trucker’s plaid shirt, watching for any motion. Spade stood coiled tight as the big steel springs under that pot-belly.

“I’ll send what we agreed,” Charlie said. “In my time, since he tried gougin’.”

“He aint gonna be happy,” Trucker said. But he looked again at Spade’s glare, shook Charlie’s hand, got in his rig, and rumbled his rig back down the lane, quieter now, no hooves to clamor for footholds on the shitty floor. At the blacktop he had to seesaw back and fourth several times to clear the tight corner by the cattle guard. But once straight on the blacktop, he jammed through the gears, puffs of diesel smoke blackening the bright November dawn. After a bit Coldwell stopped filming the Corrientes’ dust storm and turned to us.

“What were you going to do?” he asked Spade, the camera running.

“Dunno,” Spade said, more natural now, as cool as he liked to deceive folks into believing he was. “Never will.”

“Would you have struck him?”

Spade flashed his Pepsodent smile, swooned, and touched his hand to his heart, acting, sure enough, but still true to character. He feigned hurt.

“You think a man of my sterling pedigree would lower himself to physical violence,

Coldwell? What sort of brute do you think me?"

If Coldwell knew that Spade had been orphaned in a Texas brothel before his umbilical cord dried, he didn't show. He had to know that Spade was mocking his inflated diction, but he was too savvy to show that, either. Though every syllable and gesture they traded came freighted with undertones of Mercedes, they got by so long as she stayed in Tulsa.

"Mister Barnes," Coldwell said, turning his camera. "If I may ask ---"

"Best not," Charlie said. As if he knew Coldwell meant to ask about the ticket, he eased a big hand over Coldwell's lens until Coldwell's bare, boyish head popped up, his thin, light hair bending with the breeze.

"Shoot all the cowboy action ya like," Charlie said "Just druther my money and my dick not go public."

"I respect that," Coldwell said, smiling, his voice full of sudden sweetness. "It's about perception. My concern is how viewers will judge your character."

"My character?" Charlie said. "As in my *good* character? Or as in a *pretend* character?"

"Both," Coldwell said, bolder. He'd lowered his camera, as had Tedso. "You *are* acting the role of Charlie Barnes, if you will, though it's authentically you acting yourself. That's why we have such clichés as, 'He didn't act himself today.' *And* viewers will question the character of the character Charlie Barnes when he refuses to pay a bill. To viewers who don't know Charlie Barnes, he may as well be fictional. They judge solely on the drama they witness to form their judgments. Just as we all do when we are trying to establish the proper level of trust with new people. Real or fiction, it's all about vicarious living."

"Tell us again what network wants this," Spade said.

"I'm negotiating," Coldwell said. "Nothing definite yet. I've explained."

"Never axed this question," Charlie said, "but if it don't get sold, who owns it?"

Coldwell paused, frowned, clearly surprised, and stroked his camera as if he meant to summon his genie from its urn. He turned to Tedso, raised a slender gloved hand to his frown and with one smooth motion drew his boyish smile back on his mouth. Except for his surrender

to Longing, I've yet to see his match at telling himself how to feel and then acting as if he felt it. There's something to admire in a man who can beat his emotions instead of letting them beat him, credit him that. Later — after we'd learned how deceptive the little man could be — Charlie allowed that if the Arena Gods had given him half as much body as he had mind, nobody in rodeo could've matched him. And his mind was working that morning.

“On your way to rodeos, Mister Barnes, do you envision failure? Any of you? Of course not!” He aimed and finger and said, “Such thoughts become self-fulfilling prophecies. Why, then, prophesy the failure of an unborn project?”

“Let's balance our scales,” Charlie said. “Potential profit versus likely loss. I'm a numbers man. You never really answered when I axed b'fore.”

“Because it's impossible,” Coldwell said, his smile twitching.

“Then *about* how much?” Charlie said. “Ten grand, fifty grand, a mill? Easy to dream as scheme.”

“I've as many questions as you,” Coldwell said. He'd laid his camera on the cat walk of the loading chute so he could talk with both little gloved hands, which he was doing now.

“Perhaps more. Will it go major network? HBO? Twentieth Century Fox? Miramax? Will sales be limited to a stand-alone program? Or will it become serialized? Will it generate interest? Of course there'll be interest. I'm hardly fool enough to invest without believing that. Unless, however, you prefer that I deceive you with accountancy, we simply will not and cannot know numbers until we circulate product.”

“Product?” Charlie said. He seemed in disbelief. I was sad for a bit thinking of Coldwell's imminent eviction. “Product?” Charlie said again. There wasn't a hint of play to his tone. “Our lives? Product? You'd reduce everything we live for to *product*?” He seemed ready to spit.

“I would not!” Coldwell said, instantly sympathetic. He seemed to be considering the reaction if he touched Charlie's arms where they lay crossed on the top gate board.

“You know how intensely I respect your lifestyle, all of you. I treasure our relationship.

Producers will, too, I am confident. Yet I implore you to hear the word carefully, please. What would producers produce if not product? And product isn't necessarily bad. Rodeo is a product made to be marketed for live and television audiences, is it not?"

"That's what they call it a performance," Charlie said. "We don't call our lives that when folks aint payin' to watch."

"Perhaps we should?" Coldwell said, trying to be cheery. When he saw Charlie's face, he hustled past that idea. "As for risk and reward, your risk is zero. I will absorb, as we earlier agreed, all filming and travel costs for myself and Ted. Your only investment is yourselves performing the work you'd be performing whether or not we filmed. You need change nothing about of what you do or how, I promise. What can you lose? You yourself, I mean?"

There we stood, five grown men if you count Coldwell grown, asking the most important question anybody anywhere could ever ask, and the answer as simple as separating syllables: "My *self*" was exactly what each of us stood to lose, Coldwell included. Instead we spoke and heard the word as it is so casually spun off reckless tongues all across this big country: Lose "myself"? As if that were so unlikely it ought not merit thought, as if it were impossible to imagine being taken from oneself in any act short of death which, again, none of us considered. Either way, whether living severed from one's rightful identity --- one's *self* --- or dying, our risk was sure enough greater than what little weight the word carried that moment.

We'd all relaxed a bit and turned to watch the wild steers milling, a swirl of dulled yellows, reds and browns slowing, tiring, heaving, trotting like a ghost herd in the thinning dust. Their hot shitty smell saturated the air, the hushed thuds of their hooves slowing in the deep sand. Coldwell set to filming them again and backed away to frame us leaning on the gate. After a bit he lowered the camera and leaned on the gate with us, awkwardly mimicking how we placed our hands and boots.

"What'd you mean earlier 'bout 'travel' costs?" Charlie said.

"Why, to rodeos," Coldwell said. His surprised expression asked why such an obvious statement need be made. "How might we possibly offer a rodeo documentary product without —

isn't 'hauling' the correct term? — *hauling* to real rodeos with you?"

"In the same rig?"

"For verisimilitude, it seems essential."

Charlie looked at him as if to say, *In English, asshole.*

"Verisimilitude. The appearance of being true," Coldwell said, "of being real."

"It *is* real," Charlie said. "What the hell do you mean the appearance?"

"To *you*, it's real," Coldwell said. His voice broke like a boy's. "You don't question the reality of your life, Mister Barnes, nor should you. Because I'm here in person, neither do I. To viewers in New York or L.A., however, you are either a fiction or a myth — specifically the myth you seek to erase and replace."

He turned to me as he finished that sentence.

"In Chance's words, 'nobody gets it right.' Unless we show viewers real cowboys in a real truck racing to real rodeos, they will by default rely on the clichéd images you wish to shatter. Isn't truth your purest justification for cooperating? Your true reason?"

"Money spends easy," Charlie said. "Truth is hard to price."

Spade puffed his chest when the camera panned to him.

"I mean to commodify myself," Spade said, "like Lance. I want to be an industry of one."

Ever since Coldwell had taught him the term, Spade had been slinging it.

As Coldwell defined it, "To commodify" embodied a grandiose notion not even in the dictionary. It meant to rise from being one person to becoming a one-person industry. Lance's emergence as rodeo star branching into recording star, actor, commentator, and designer of his own clothing and tack lines served as Coldwell's immediate example, though he cited megastars such as JLo, too.

"Sole proprietor of Spade Spader, LLC," Spade said. He cocked his jaw as if daring anyone — especially Charlie — to deny him.

It took a silent moment for me to realize the camera awaited my answer to the true reason I'd let him film me.

“To get it right,” I said. “I don’t want folks thinkin’ that shit on CMT is real cowboy.”

“Sheeee-it!,” Spade said. He punched my shoulder. “Ya might can fool the fans with hokey notes, Big Thump, but ya damn sure can’t fool the band.”

I looked to Coldwell, which is to say at the camera.

“Am I lyin’?” I said.

“I’m merely the camera now,” Coldwell said.

“Not a thought of fame?” Spade goaded.

“Aint what I said. I said my true reason is just for a chance to rodeo, to make a run at the world.”

“Yore gonna get that either way,” Charlie said.

“That’s what I know. Film, no film, all the same to me.”

But it wasn’t. I’d felt the camera’s lure. Some guys would’ve called me a liar and been right. I called myself that word until I found a better word: actor. Even then it was clear that nobody was going to remain himself, not totally, with cameras on us. But I asked myself then as I still sometimes do when sleep cheats me if we would’ve remained ourselves even without Coldwell’s camera. Money and fame might’ve needed no help changing us. As the saying goes, the pursuit of happiness guarantees the pursuit, not the happiness. So when I wonder how things might’ve ended without Coldwell’s camera, I allow, as Spade said when Coldwell asked him if he’d have punched the trucker, “Don’t know. Never will.”

Chapter Eighteen

Twenty-four guys booked the three-day steer wrestling clinic at \$500 per man. That entitled them to Charlie's coaching, his two training videos, and his inspirational training book, *Hooves, Horns, and Hustle*, which was a hodge-podge of doctored autobiography, rodeo pictures, and a poor boy's instructional manual for Bulldogging 101 available only in paperback. Lucy, I learned, had taped Charlie talking then keyed in his text, editing it to at least passable language while preserving Charlie's quirks. When I once asked Charlie how he came to write a book that shared so little of what he'd taught me, he grinned his coyote grin and said, "Think of it as a \$9.95 plus shipping and handling flyer for my doggin' schools."

The \$500 fee also included all the runs guys could stand on steers and use of practice horses that, all except Mack, were for sale. Though he wouldn't confess profits on camera, Charlie told me and Spade that he'd sent a good many horses home from schools with new owners for three to six grand each. The fee did not include rent of the arena apartments, which Charlie offered for an extra \$40 per night. All apartments except mine and Spade's were for rent. Coldwell and Tedso had moved into a pretty cashy rented motor home, complete with wireless Internet and satellite TV, that they parked beside the barn.

Part of our work preparing for the school, then, was not only to pattern and throw all eighty of the wild new steers three times each — which strained muscles, layered bruise upon bruise, and shredded several shirts — but to do it mostly on the practice horses Charlie wanted tuned for potential buyers. If there was an easy run, I missed it. I felt every feeling but good. Besides fighting those wild steers, Spade had orders to nail new plates on a bunch of horses, too. My job was to trim their manes and fetlocks, which I'd done the week before. And, as if our other work didn't leave us near enough dead, with Elena's scolding we had to help clean the apartments and ready the arena café, a long-narrow room beside the stairwell to the apartments. The cafe lay sealed except for his clinics or jackpots. Coldwell documented it all, he and Tedso trading shifts while Spade and I worked most of three days without sleep.

"No better conditionin' for makin' a run at the world," Charlie drawled. He

philosophized for the camera: “Sleep’s a luxury that losers mortgage their futures to buy.” But even Coldwell noticed that Charlie had a love affair with his own pillow while the rest of us readied the place. Whatever the cause, something shamed Charlie into an act bordering on fairness. Come Thanksgiving morning, right after we’d loaded the forty sorriest steers in the truck for Arkansas (“How they know gonna which was the good ones?” Charlie asked as we sorted), Charlie had gone into the tack room and unrolled the wad of bills. He came out biting back a grin and joined us for Elena’s breakfast in the newly scrubbed and painted arena café. Spade, Lucy, Tedso, Coldwell, and I were gathered around a table, Spade and I more tired than hungry.

“You boys’ve damn shore earned a cut,” Charlie said. “Ten percent of the net from this whole week is yours.”

“Each?” I said. Charlie shot me his bad-dog scowl.

“I got ‘xpenses,” he said. “Risk is all mine, ya know.”

When Coldwell asked, on camera, how many dollars we might expect, Charlie dodged: “Won’t know til the last rig rolls out.”

Late that afternoon, after our little family had feasted on tortillas instead of turkey, the first rigs began to roll in. And the guys who came to bulldog sure enough varied as much as the steers. Some guys brought their parents, others came with wives or girlfriends. Still others hauled kids, dogs, roping dummies, and tie-down goats to keep the kids from hanging one another. They came in oil-burners sorrier than Flatlander. They came in rolling Hiltons. Some came to jump their first steer, others to hone their edge for circuit finals or major jackpots. What mattered to Charlie was that they came. Their rigs spilled off the gravel areas and across the pasture like tepees at an old time trappers’ rendezvous. The total mob must’ve numbered near one-hundred, and it seemed there were about that many horses hitched to any plank or trailer that would hold a lead shank.

Hungry people packed Charlie’s arena café. To staff it, he’d had Elena call in relatives whose cooking abilities matched hers even if their legal status didn’t. There were a half-dozen

wary men and women scrambling to fill orders, seldom relaying anything in English. When Coldwell or Tedso passed with cameras, the workers scattered, and folks were complaining of hunger by the time Charlie ordered Coldwell to keep cameras away from the kitchen.

“It is reality we’re capturing,” Coldwell said, acting innocent.

“Capture aint a word they like to hear,” Charlie said, “even if they don’t know English.”

Friday, the first official day of the clinic, Charlie divided his students into groups according to experience level. He took the novices because he wanted “to square the foundation.” Spade coached the intermediates during groundwork, but Charlie allowed he’d handle the horseback portion of their runs. Truth was, Spade’s horsemanship was suspect, which served as yet another wedge between Charlie and Spade. And Coldwell’s camera caught that, too, the tension as Spade resisted and sometimes resented Charlie’s coaching. Charlie sent me to work with the most seasoned guys, saying, “So they can teach *you* somethin’.” There were only four of them, two pair of guys who hauled together, shared horses, and hazed for one another. Teddy, “Red Ted” Redding and Cimarron Katlin were ammie toughs in the United Rodeo Association, a level comparable to double-A baseball.

Will Koeck and Chip Barker were solid PRCA hands who were qualified for the National Circuit Finals Championship in Pocatello, Idaho. Will was tall, lean, quiet, and fast of hand. He’d nicknamed his hauling buddy Chip “Square Bear” because Chip’s size forty-six shoulders atop twenty-six inseam jeans made him look square as a hay bale. They’d brought their own horses, good ones, and hazed for one another unless Charlie spotted something wrong and tapped in. My main job for those four guys was to prod cattle up the chute and work the gate release when they nodded. I’d been demoted to chute help, which was fine because I gimped around godawful sore from hat crown to boot heel after throwing those wild steers all week.

Before everybody got there, we’d pinned together six-foot-high steel panels to slice the arena in half length wise, creating two pens. While one group ran steers horseback, another group practiced their technique afoot by releasing steers from the crowd alley where we always did our ground work. About time to break for lunch on the first day, my crew and I loosened the

cinches on our horses and walked across the arena to eavesdrop on Charlie coaching the novices. Tedso was filming the action while Coldwell interviewed the mother of a kid who'd just mucked his first steer to the mat.

"The closer ya are to the dirt," Charlie lectured his recruits, "the less bad technique hurts. The horse just magnifies the danger."

Spade, perched on a fence rail, winked at me as we waited for Charlie to finish.

"Though horses do increase your odds of placin'," Spade teased. Everybody laughed. That's when Charlie spotted Spade's gangsta dew rag in place of a hat. Tedso filmed Charlie's scowl and Spade's smirk.

"Providin' you can ride right," Charlie said. "Not everybody can." Spade winced. Coldwell caught that, too.

That night after the café closed and Charlie had gone to bed, a bunch of us camped in the café. I'd called my disappointed folks and promised home for Christmas. I'd left a Happy Thanksgiving message on Lucy's voice mail, too, since she hadn't called me. And I told myself that she really was with her folks like she'd said she'd be.

At first it was just Spade, the four seasoned hands I'd been working with, and I in the cafe. Spade had showed around the latest pics of Mercedes stored in his camera phone, nothing naked but baring lots of skin and always that long lush hair and those big lost ragamuffin eyes.

"What I caint get is how you scrape your hands off her long enough to toy with your damn phone," Cimarron said.

"She has her gal pals take most of 'em," Spade said, "then sends 'em to me. So I won't forget."

"Alzheimer's wouldn't let a man forget her," Chip said. "Any more like her at the titty bar?"

"Yeah," Cimarron said. "Night like this could use bed warmers."

"A curse on both your houses," Spade said. He tsk-tsked them. "Married men."

"Not til May," Cimarron said.

“Same as,” Spade said. He folded his phone. “Best put this away before you blue-balled pecker-deads rape a mare.”

Other guys heard us or saw the lights and eased in. Tables filled. When a few bottles materialized, things got a little louder. The place was rolling when Coldwell and Tedso came in with cameras, filming as they walked, ushering a quiet so still you could’ve heard a fly fart.

“Cameras and pistols checked at the door,” Spade said.

“We’ve no pistols,” Coldwell joked. But we’d always suspected that Tedso carried.

“I do,” Spade said. He cocked his finger and leveled it at Coldwell.

“Cowboy humor,” Coldwell said. He lowered his camera and offered a twitchy smile. “So delightfully astir with the omnipresent threat of death.” He and Tedso lay their cameras on chairs. Everybody watched them.

“Now, may we partake of the festivities?” Coldwell asked. The guy was way too smart not to know how his language made us think of him. But I’d come to admire that when he dropped into character, he didn’t surrender to audience demands.

Spade, a mean whiskey glint in his red eyes, boot-scooted out the chair between him and Chip for Coldwell, who seemed equally afraid of using or refusing it. After a bit of deliberation while Spade grinned that big dangerous grin, he took it. And he may’ve found the courage when Tedso took the stool at the long counter directly at Spade’s back, his eyes scanning us all. Spade flicked off Coldwell’s lid and scruffed the little guy’s fine light hair until it lay tangled as a straw pile. A line or two at a time, the talk began again. Around our table sat Coldwell, Spade, Cimmaron, Will, Chip the Square Bear, and I. Cimarron pulled out his copy of Shannon’s *God’s Forgotten Daughter* Easter CD, which he’d bought on the way to Charlie’s school hoping she might be there to autograph it.

To my thinking Lance and Shannon had calculated Coldwell’s calculations of their worth to him, and they were already too celebrated to need the profits he might share from profiting off their celebrity. Though they never outright tried to warn us off him, their absence ought to have done so. So in place of the real Shannon, the controversial cover of her on a cross, naked but for

a loin cloth, lay in the center of our table.

“If I could be Lance for one just one day,” Cimarron said, “I’d never ask another favor of God.”

“A man would ‘bout have to die after such a day,” Will said. “Be no pleasure in your home life after that.”

“Would any of you find her a threat to your masculinity?” Coldwell asked.

“Lance don’t,” Spade said, “if that’s your question. Without her, he’d still be in the Top Ten and rollin’ in endorsements. The next Shannon would never be more than a month down the road for a guy like that. He can replace her a damn sight easier than the reverse.”

Others groaned, not nearly as certain. A bottle circled the table again, all of us gulping straight from it and letting the burn hold until the bottle circled again. It was Chip’s bottle, and he’d cracked the seal on it a few sips before sharing. He’d drunk his way into the Philosophical Zone about three circles before the rest of us could catch him.

“Ya know,” Chip said. “Sometimes I get thinkin’ about guys like Lance and about regular guys like us.”

“Speak for yourself, long legs,” Spade said. “Unless you gate cut me onto the same herd as Lance.”

“I don’t,” Chip said. “Only you can do that. Til then, you’re one of us.” Coldwell sponged it up.

“And what would that be?” Coldwell said. He’d passed the bottle twice without drinking, which elevated the suspicions of the already suspicious. Chip drew a big swig and held it, his eyes hard on Coldwell, before answering.

“The Just-Enough Club,” he said.

“Here we go,” Will said. “How many times have I heard this?”

Chip licked his finger and tallied another imaginary count in the air.

“Add one,” Chip said. He stood up, yelled for everybody to listen, and leaned on the counter beside Tedso, who turned to brace him if need be. I hadn’t thought him as drunk as he

was. Standing always dooms a drunk.

“Spielberg here wants to hear this,” Chip started. His voice was steadier than his legs. “Not to brag, guys, but ya’ll know I’m a sure enough salty hand. Made the circuit finals seven of ten years since I filled my card. But it’s a struggle, always. Money. Horses. Rigs. Wife and kids. My own dwindlin’ desire. I win a good bit, true enough --- else I couldn’t afford being here tonight --- but not much more than it costs to get down the road. But I do win enough to keep me out here, which is the curse. Now if I could win me just a little more, I’d damn sure be *somebody*, endorsements, sponsors, the whole skidoolie. And if I won me just a little less, I’d sell my rig and flour my nuts on the back deck like my old lady wants. But as it is, past thirty now, I win just enough to keep me thinkin’ I belong. You might could say that makes me a charter member of the just-enough club.”

“I aint applyin’,” Spade said.

“Me, neither,” I said.

“Who ever did?” Chip said. He’d resettled in his chair, mildly numb, not mad or sad, just accepting --- as my daddy might’ve said --- that it was meant to be.

“You’ll just be drivin’ down some midnight highway,” Chip said, “and you’ll know you’re in.”

“We here so that don’t happen,” Spade said. “This barn is where it starts.”

Chip laughed, dark and cold as winter mud.

“Where you think my road started?” he said. “Charlie hauled me while you was in third grade.”

“Which time?” Spade said.

“Drunk talk,” I said.

“He tells the same thing sober,” Cimarron said. Spade grabbed the bottle and drew a big swig, his dark eyes reading the room.

“Let’s talk about something happy,” he said. “Nut cancer. Pregnant girlfriends. Plane crashes.”

He made his hand into plane, jumped up, and made plane noises — *zzzzrrrrroooooom* — as he buzzed over everybody’s head, knocking off hats as he flew, until the little plane’s engine sputtered — *ahutahutahuttttaaaa* --- then nose-dived it into the counter next to Tedso with the accompanying sounds of explosions and whooshing flames. Spade brushed the glaring Tedso’s pants and made gruesome grimaces as if sweeping off body parts.

Chip, and too-fast Jack, had ruined my night. Not even Spade’s shenanigans helped. I was brooding drunk and too tired to sleep. I gathered my hat from the floor and stomped upstairs to my apartment. Soon the café was roaring again, but I didn’t care. I flopped on my bed, feeling lost. Coldwell tapped at my door and opened it before I answered. Tedso shadowed him in, each carrying a camera but neither filming, and they closed the door behind them.

“Come in,” I said.

“Chance! Chance! Chance!” Coldwell said, his boyish face beaming, “What a golden shaft we’ve drilled tonight!”

He lay his camera on my ratty couch, flashed his tape recorder as if it were a pistol, and played Chip’s depressing little tale. Nobody had asked if he’d been recording sound. When Chip said, “just-enough club,” Coldwell rewound and played it again, his wiry little body leaned over me like a jockey over his horse’s neck, holding the whirring recorder next to my ear.

“This gold is purer gold than any winner’s buckle,” he gushed.

“Hitch it to *your* belt,” I said. “Not mine.” Giddy, he played it again.

“Beautiful!” he said. His little voice wasn’t much above a whisper, but it came with the force of a shout. “How poetic!” He waved his recorder, Chip still droning on, so close to my face my eyelids flinched.

“This is the connection I’ve sought,” he said, “the copulation of film and rodeo.”

“That’s an odd word coming from a man bent over my bed,” I said.

He laughed. Even Tedso laughed. And I, despite myself, laughed. His crazy optimistic enthusiasm had again worked. Tedso dropped into my recliner, Coldwell onto the couch. Coldwell raised his recorder to his face and kissed it, then sighed wistfully as he lay it like a baby

on his little blue-jean lap.

“Script writers too often think only in terms of a character’s desires,” he said. “Desires are crucial, certainly, but one needs also to discover his character’s dread.”

He looked at me.

“Now I know your fear,” he said. “Not you personally, Chance, though the universal ‘You’ encompasses the particular ‘You.’ I’m speaking of the universal ‘You,’ as in ‘You Cowboys.’ Injuries and pain do not scare you. You pride yourself on your lightning-scarred nose. Death does not scare you, or such is your facade. So what does? What scares you?”

When I didn’t answer, he reached in and waved his recorder.

“Being cognizant that you’re not quite good enough. If I may be so bold, you’ve collapsed there on your bed because — ” he waved his recorder “— Chip canceled your insurance policy against failure, so to speak. Charlie Barnes is not your Holy Grail. You’ve lost faith, am I correct?”

“What is it you want?” I said. “Are you recording now?” I checked Tedso’s hands to see what he was doing. They were folded, big scarred fingers interlocked as chain link fence. His heavy, hooded eyes peered at me like a turtle’s.

“No, but I’m asking permission.”

“To film me?”

“To interview you. May I?”

“Why?”

“To get it right,” he said. “You hold contempt for the Hollywood crap, if I recall. Isn’t that why you agreed?”

“And if I say no?”

“Then, unless I abandon the project, which I well may have to, we’ll retreat to myth because . . . to be blunt . . . the truth frightens you.”

“You don’t even know if there’s going to be a film,” I said, “or a series. Or whatever. You said yourself you’ve no guarantees, no deep-pocket producers. You’ve got to be bleeding

cash for somethin' that'll never even happen. What if you do all this and nobody cares? All this work and time out of your life for nothin'? You ever think of that?"

Even before I finished, I realized I was describing myself.

"*We* persist, don't *we*?" he said. And in those wild boyish eyes came the bittersweet wisdom and kindness I'd sometimes seen in Granddaddy's when he'd told of my daddy as a boy.

"Get out your goddamn camera," I said.

Chapter Nineteen

I've left out a good bit about the school and why I felt as I did. After two weeks of unreturned messages, Lucy called me late on the Friday before the clinic. I was so beat it took several rings to wake me.

"Alone?" she said. I recognized her voice.

"Who wants to know?"

"Are you?"

"Matter?"

"Like company?"

"I wouldn't be any," I said.

"Not tonight," she said. "I'm still in Columbia."

"Then it aint gonna happen," I said. I told her about the steers coming; the horses Charlie wanted ridden, shod, and trimmed; apartments to ready; the kitchen to repair and open, and the temporary fences and pens to build.

"Once Charlie gets home," I said, "I may not *see* this bed again for a week."

"And all this time I've been saving myself."

"Like I'd know. Thought you'd canceled your phone contract."

She'd been evasive the last few times we'd spoken, skimming holiday plans and her winter break. Then she'd stopped answering.

"When did Mr. I-Don't-Need-Anyone become so needy?"

"All I need is sleep," I said.

"Hang up," she said. So I did. And I switched off my ringer. And it felt so right I slept fine. The next morning I played her messages. One: "You must think me one sick bitch. I'll bet you rue the day you watched your good girl go. I do not love you. I never will. Maybe you should call her." Message two: "I hope you don't. She's suffered enough." Message three: "Forgive me? Please call." I told myself I'd ignore her the way she'd ignored me. Life's about choices, I told myself. She gated me outside her academic world. Well, I'd gate her cute little

size-six butt out of mine, even if I was a squatter on her uncle's territory. I'd not speak to her in person unless spoken to. I'd not touch her. And I'd damn sure not call.

So I called right after chores.

"You slept?" she said, her voice full of sorrow.

"Like the guy in the mattress ad."

"He's an actor," she said. "Speaking of acting, did Charlie really agree to Coldwell's scheme?" Spade had called her for advice.

"Seems so."

"I'll be damned," Lucy said.

"That's what Elena says," I told her. "By her thinking, we all will."

"Can't trust her," Lucy said. "She wants you and me paired up."

"Proof of her madness," I said.

"Chance?" she said. "May I tell you something? When I don't call, you shouldn't think that I don't want to. It could mean I want it too much. I won't let that happen."

"What will you let happen?"

"Not that."

"I'm damn sure glad I don't love you," I said.

"Ditto," she said, her voice breaking as we hung up. I felt hollow as oil field pipe. There it was, that same toxic potion that could lie dormant in a man's blood like thistle seeds in good dirt, sprouting years after they'd dropped. What can't things live and die in their own season? About eleven o'clock that night, Saturday, I was brushing the last horse I'd worked when Lucy's shadow caused the horse to shy.

"For a big guy," she said, "you have a gentle stroke."

"Somebody told me that gentleness was the truest measure of power," I said.

"Sounds Eastern," Lucy said. I didn't tell her that I'd heard it from a kinky little Buddhist with whom I'd sweated a few mattresses before meeting my ex-sweet little rich girl. I wondered as I unhaltered the gelding in his stall if her path had led to Tibet. Things don't work out with

rodeo, I told my bad self, I might ought to go there and see.

“Checked in with Charlie?” I asked. By then I cared more about what he thought than what she did. But her perfume teased me into facing her.

“He’s ‘in conference’ with Tweedle-Dee and Twiddle-Dum at the kitchen table. Can you believe Charlie said, ‘in conference’? They’re even drinking gourmet green tea that Coldwell brought. Elena’s offended. Charlie’s smoking a cigar. Did you know he smoked?”

“Only from the ears,” I said. I moved close to ease my arms around her.

“Things any smoother between him Spade?” she said. “Spade here?”

“Tulsa,” I said.

“Miss Stage Fright?” Lucy said.

“Classified info,” I said. “He didn’t say. But surely is. He’s packing new pics of her in his phone.”

She pocketed her gloves and slid her hands inside my unzipped jacket and onto my back, her open palms pulling me closer, her cheek pressed to my chest as if checking my heart. I worked my hands between us, unzipped her quilted down jacket, and tugged the tail of her blouse free of her jeans.

“Some girls might ask a man to wash his hands first,” she said.

“Charlie know you’re out here?”

“What if he does?”

“His barn. His niece.”

“His apprentice.”

“For now. The others will always be.”

“I can leave.”

“And no doubt will. Only question is, before or after?”

“It’s all about that?” she said. “Sex is all I am?”

I stood her at the end of my arms, steadying her with my hands on her shoulders so she had to face me.

“You’re a sorry conversationalist. I don’t have a chess set. There’s nothing on TV. And I promised not to love you. What’s left? A moonlit walk on a moonless night?”

She owned the same stony eyes Charlie did, and could cast their glare just as hard.

“I’m going to bed,” she said.

We stood like duelists, each awaiting the signal, neither blinking. She must’ve satisfied herself because she shrugged, smirked, zipped her jacket, and turned to go. I propped a boot on the stall gate and listened to the happy gut sounds of the gelding munching his sweet feed and prairie hay. The scent of horses, molasses, and bluestem crowded her lingering perfume from my lungs. I told myself not to look, and I didn’t. But I was aware without looking that she’d stopped at the end of the alley where the stall runway opened to the main arena. And then I looked. She stood in the soft white light, her tangled black hair spilling over the shoulders of her white down jacket. Her breath rose and circled her hair like a halo.

“Coming?” she asked.

When it was over we lay watching our breath rise, her scent strange in my stale ‘partment.

“Good night, Chance Jacob Hendrix,” she said. “I don’t love you.”

“Good night, Lucinda Rose Barnes. I don’t something you.”

“You’re the writer,” she said. “You need to find us a word for what we make when we don’t make the L-word.”

“Who cares?” I said. “So long as it’s not babies.”

“That won’t happen,” she said. “That, I promise.”

“Listen,” I said, “given Coldwell’s prowling camera and the mob that’s due here, it’s likely best if we act like we don’t know each other the next few days.”

She slid atop me and pinned my wrists to the mattress, her naked skin snowy rows of sudden goose bumps. She bent forward until she rested on her elbows and brushed her body softly over mine.

“Who needs act?” she said. “We don’t.”

“You are one twisted chick,” I said.

“Which is why you’ll never love me,” she said. “Loveless Bed-Bouncer is all I’ll ever be to you.”

She stopped lowering herself onto me, her green eyes as glazed as a frozen lake.

“Do you ever call her?” she asked. “Not that I care. Curious, is all.”

“Nope.”

“Honest?”

“Not once.”

She rocked softly on me and stroked the nape of my neck, exciting herself and me.

“Ever think about it?”

“Sometimes.”

She smiled a cold smile.

“Think about her now,” she said. Her eyes were aimed at me, yet seeing something or somebody far away. She sucked her lower lip hard enough to bruise. “I’ll pretend you’re somebody else.”

“This gets your kicks?” I said. She eased herself all the way onto me, working her tender inner muscles.

“It keeps promises,” she said. “We took a vow, remember?”

I didn’t answer nor think she wanted me to. And then the eeriest thing happened. From the chicken roost the thin November air carried the rapid thumpa-thumpa-thumpa of a rooster batting his wings against his chest. If I’d been superstitious, I might’ve allowed it was an omen. Elena did, Charlie told me later. That screechy midnight crowing had sure enough knelt her before her crucifix, crossing herself all night. But the only spell cast on me was Lucy’s damned denial of all beautiful feelings. And just as dreams must dissolve with dawn, when Lucy collapsed, hammering her forehead against my chest as she sobbed, I wondered for the first time how a story as sad as ours might end anywhere this side of death. In the morning I awoke alone, Lucy’s pillow still damp from tears, and not even a note buried beneath it.

Chapter Twenty

The real trouble between Spade and Charlie started over a horse, Roman, that Spade had agreed to buy on sketchy terms from Charlie. Part of the confusion was that Roman was a grade gelding Charlie'd bought off a North Dakota ranch with no registration papers to transfer as proof of ownership. Charlie'd bought Roman out of a trailer for a thousand cash from a broke saddle bronc rider he'd found camped in the parking lot of a Pine Ridge casino. I sometimes wondered — as I was sure Charlie did — if Roman had rightly been the cowboy's to sell. Because Charlie and Spade never wrote the terms, and since part of the pay was Spade's traded labor, I'm not sure even they could say who owned how much of Roman that day. Nor does it really matter, except for the tension it'd already created. What matters is that Roman was a crooked-headed but highly promising six-year-old blue roan gelding we'd been bringing along slow. S.L.O.W. was Charlie's way.

“Ya build a horse same as the ‘gyptians built pyramids,” he'd drawl, “one stone at a time, carved square and set true to last. That way everybody what ever steps up on ‘im will say, ‘aint he somethin’?”

And the stones Charlie set under his horses involved getting a handle on them first so they'd travel light in the bit and smooth as reining horses in their patterns. When they could spin three-sixties and lope smooth enough not to spill water from a cup, we'd start them on cattle, slow cattle at slow speeds.

“What the dummies don't know is that bits don't control horses,” Charlie'd say. “Bits only cue ‘em, same as spurs. Ya got to own a horse's brain to train ‘im. Aint no way a man can out-power one.”

Because dogging horses are more times than not naturally chargey, eager to run, we'd trail steers lazily around the arena or in outside traps at a walk or trot, teaching the horses lots of patience.

“No need to teach ‘im what he does natural,” was Charlie's thinking. “Horse wants to run all the time got to learn walk. Horse wants to walk all the time got, he got to learn run. Teach

means to show somethin' they *don't* know. Aint complicated. I'd spent hours asking chargey horses just to stand quiet on a slack rein in the middle of a herd. Charlie allowed, too, that we were in the relationship business, earning a horse's respect and trust before assigning him a job.

"If you teach a horse nothin' else," Charlie told me over the phone my first week, "teach him who he is. Most horses is gullible enough they'll try to be whoever we ask 'em to be, even if it don't fit. Let 'em know we understand who they are, what they do best, and that we've got the perfect job for who they are."

What Roman did best was run.

"Sumbitch got Secretariat's heart." That's what Charlie said the first time he watched me let Roman blow down the lane to the cattle guard. Secretariat was the '73 Triple Crown winner whose oversized heart shocked the vets who autopsied him after he'd died of old age. That giant heart seemed to explain why he'd smashed track records and dropped the top horses in every field as if they were carousel ponies.

"And an Angel Sings attitude," I said. Angel Sings was crowned PRCA's top saddle bronc of the year several years running.

All fall I'd schooled Roman as best I knew — often with Charlie's phoned-in coaching — while everybody else was rodeoing. As fearless as he was fast, Roman was big and stout enough that he'd never bobble with a bulldogger flapping from the right stirrup. His color, size, and big curved nose said he about had to have Joe Hancock blood in him, which his temperament validated. If his cinch pinched just right, he'd buck hard enough to cause nosebleeds. But even though he'd airmailed me a few times, he never got Spade afoot. Twice after Charlie and Spade made their sketchy deal, I'd watched Spade clawing at his saddle swells and cantle like a monkey astraddle a bowling ball yelling "Yeehaw!" until the storm subsided. Charlie, determined to ease the buck out of Roman, still allowed through a dry grin, "They're bad enough to be good together, some distant day."

And there, *distant day*, was the other source of trouble. For Spade, *now* was never soon enough. He craved Mercedes now. And fame now. For somebody who'd spent his short troubled

life chasing the pale gray shadows of rainbows always beaming for somebody else, tomorrow meant eternity. But for Charlie, whether building horse or human athletes, a year might be too soon. In the rich layers that lay between Charlie's sparse spoken lines, he'd as much as told me that he meant to ground Spade for awhile after the Finals. And I knew by his manner that it hurt him as if he were a father surrendering his son for crimes inherited. If only he'd told Spade how he felt, this story might've ended any of a thousand ways.

"tween the camera and the gal, he's broke out more times in the last month than he's got out clean," Charlie said. Breaking the barrier too often not only cost them lost winnings, it also messed up Charlie's horses, which was worse. Having a seat on the best horses demanded mutual obligation. The owner had to keep his horses perfect in mind and body. And the riders had to ride them right. If a rider was rattled all the time, the horses soon would be. And then other riders would find something else to get on. For sheer survival, the owner either had to coach or ground anybody who messed with his horses. It was seldom pretty.

"Them two come along just when I had him goin' right. Now I got to settle him back into hisself."

In the tug-of-war between Spade and Charlie that Coldwell was about to whistle to life, I was the rope. I couldn't imagine Spade staying around if Charlie grounded him, even if only for a few months. And I knew Charlie couldn't let rattled Spade ruin his horses. Coldwell, whose little mouse ears could've served as seismographs to sense conflict, had caught the rumblings, I was pretty sure. Spade had not. In his lust for Mercedes and his urgency to become commodified, Spade had fallen prey to Coldwell's quest for more intense excitement to film.

"Action," became Coldwell's leading word, sometimes paired up with "drama. Dramatic action." He'd asked, as if disappointed by the practice routine that returned when Charlie's school ended, did we have "any activities of interest" planned soon. Charlie flashed him a *dumb-dog* scowl.

The National Finals Rodeo In Vegas — our Super Bowl, our World Cup, our World Series — was two weeks away. Lance would meet us there, holding the number six slot in the

world standing. Spade had dropped to the last hole in the Top Fifteen, but he was still in. Me, I'd boot-brush the alleyways on a Partner Pass that labeled me as somebody's cell bitch, but I'd be there, by damn. Charlie, meanwhile, meant to cash Lance, Spade, and any other of the Top Fifteen in the world who needed a mount and a haze. We had both teams primed. In the name of the Arena Gods, what force could've crowded the NFR from the little man's grand thinking?

"Of course, of course the NFR," he said, waving off Charlie's scowl. Then he confided the source of his disappointment. Wrangler, who owned naming rights to the NFR, had denied him camera access. They'd demanded a contract fee he couldn't guarantee. Following an interruption from yet another of his hushed phone calls, he told us that we needed something "more immediate, to be candid, more urgent than mere practice," to show his people before our documentary deal could happen, not that there *was* a deal..

Truth be told, though he didn't outright say it, he seemed to be growing bored, questioning our interest level to an audience, as if our real lives at Charlie's were too real. Besides filming our activities, he'd interviewed us almost daily in person to record our thinking when everybody was home. And he'd interview Charlie and Spade by phone when they were on the road. Now that he'd recorded almost a month of real rodeo reality, he seemed uncertain of its market. And Spade heard in his words a threat to his *now*. The morning of the Roman trouble, Coldwell had told us again as his hands fluttered over breakfast, "Only conflict interests viewers."

His people were waiting for him to pitch them a central conflict, dramatic action he could arc and viewers could follow. Schooling horses, tending steers, and practicing simply lacked the mass appeal he needed to sell us as "product." His narrative line needed direction. He blurted that he needed, "A clearly defined conflict that promises a dramatic arc toward a profound resolution, one after which the characters are forever changed," then smiled to punctuate it. Charlie had stopped chafing at being called a character, but he big-time balked at the idea of conflict.

"Aint good for the truck," Charlie said.

“But isn’t conflict omnipresent?” Coldwell said. It was clear that, as always, he’d thought on things a good bit before speaking. “Hypothetically, if Lance, Spade, and Chance are in the same rig, entering the same rodeos, isn’t it inevitable that they’re in conflict for the prize money?”

“Comp’tition, not conflict,” Charlie said. “In our sport, the man standin’ in first place might haze for the guy who moves him out of it.”

“Have you? Have you honestly abetted the man who beat you?”

“Abetted?” Charlie said. “Like doin’ right is a crime?”

“I spoke in haste,” Coldwell said. “Aided?”

“That word aint nothin’ but the other one in the crime,” Charlie said. “But the answer is yes, plenty times.” He sipped his coffee and studied little Coldwell, the cogs of Coldwell’s mind visible in the pulsing of his brows’ feet and mouth lines.

“Were you never — even for a transient moment — tempted to be ensure your own position? Wouldn’t anyone in that position be tempted?”

“Not if he’s got a cowboy hair on his ass,” Charlie said.

“He thought about it,” Spade said, winking. “Just too honorable to do it.”

“You claim to know my thinking?” Charlie said. “Might ought to get yoreself a second job tellin’ fortunes.”

“I can tell mine,” Spade said. “World champeen steer wrestler. Least ways mine’s still in the future, Old Timer.”

Charlie glared at Spade and Coldwell, then eased out his billfold, a tattered, hand-tooled scrap of leather he refused to replace because it’d been a gift from a friend now dead. He counted out ten one-hundred bills on the table beside his egg-and-jelly-stained plate, slapped his hand atop his worn dark wallet still packed with green, and smiled calmly at Spade as if giving the odds of rain. His grizzled stubble shone silver as a knife blade in the light.

“Ten head,” Charlie said. “You pick five. I pick five.”

Spade paled, not, I allowed, because he feared Charlie or even feared matching him. No,

to my thinking he paled because he realized — likely for the first time — that he might ought to be scared of himself. He looked to Coldwell, who'd reached for a camera but stopped when Charlie rapped his knuckles on the table.

“Even if I had the money,” Spade said, “what would I ride?”

“Any horse in this barn,” Charlie said. “Scooter if ya like.”

“Who'd haze?”

“You. Me. Who else?”

Spade shrugged and looked from Charlie to me to Tedso, who gazed on with that turtle-eyed calm that defined him.

“Big Thump,” Spade said, trying to recover his swagger.

Charlie pursed his lips and shook his head no.

“I'll spot ya the goddamn money,” he said. “Afterward, you can work off yore debt.”

Spade's expressions whirled like leaves in a dust devil. He'd seem for an instant ready to joke, then ready to swing, then ready to cry. Still pale, he faced Coldwell, who looked to be filming with his eyes, as if his flamboyant mind were archiving the little biscuits-and-gravy drama for reference. Coldwell turned to me and then to Charlie, who waited mellow as a mouse in a fresh haymow. They stared at one another across that silent table until Spade lowered his eyes and scooted his chair sideways, one hand braced on the table and the other atop the chair, as if ready to leave.

“You need not predict my future,” Charlie said. He tucked the bills back into his stack and put away his wallet. “This body's been bruised, battered, and broke, but they's a good many miles left in the tank.”

“I meant no insult,” Spade said.

“Nor did I,” Charlie said. “Just answerin' yore call.” He turned to Coldwell and said, “Believe me now?”

“Unequivocally,” Coldwell said, unflustered. Charlie furrowed his brow. He looked toward Elena at the sink, leaned closer to Coldwell, and lowered his voice.

“Don’t do no damn good to make English the ‘ficial language if yore determined to mangle it. Do you even *know* any regular words?”

“The answer to both your questions is ‘yes,’ Mister Barnes.”

“Thanks,” Charlie said. “If it wouldn’t throw yore tongue into shock, we might could have us a reg’lar conversation some time.”

“Might could,” Coldwell said. He smiled a gentle, little-boy smile. Even Tedso grinned, baring the gaps where his wolf teeth had been. Charlie seemed relieved, as if he’d defused a bomb with two ticks to spare, but that was before he learned the drama Spade intended for Roman.

“If you’ll ‘xcuse me,” he said, standing, “I gotta go see what kinda day it’s gonna be.”

By then even Coldwell knew that the outcome of Charlie’s morning skirmish between his bowels and his hemorrhoids was the only horoscope he trusted. After Charlie left for the john, Coldwell turned chipper.

“Shall we adjourn to the arena?” he said.

“Elena’s likely to put us scrubbing dishes if we don’t,” I said. I said it loud enough to tease Elena at her sink, but she ignored me and took up some Mexican song in her fine husky voice that had me wanting to slap a tambourine and clack my heels together as her voice ushered me out the door.

I saddled the three practice horses Charlie’d asked me to saddle and led them to the arena, their head gear hanging on the saddle horns. Spade had steers loaded in the chute. He sat astraddle Roman, who he’d jack-knifed into the corner of the dogging box. All thirteen-hundred pounds of Roman was fighting the bit and pattering in place, white-eyed and lathered, his nostrils flared. Drops of blood beaded on the bit in the raw corners of his pink-flecked mouth. That was the scene when Charlie came walking across the arena. But instead of snatching Spade out of the saddle like I was tempted to do, Charlie took Casper the hazing horse from me, bridled him, snugged the cinches, and swung up. He rode into the dogging box, spun Casper a one-eighty, and mooched him back until he was wedged tight against Spade and Roman. Roman released his

breath for the first time in who-knew-how-long with Casper beside him. I trailed along and perched on a rail in the hazing box, feeling about as sick as I was mad to see Roman so jacked up.

“He’s too good to ruin for anybody’s damn movie,” Charlie said, low. He worked his chew in his jaw, his body relaxed.

“My horse,” Spade said.

“Not yet,” Charlie said, “but no matter. He don’t need ruined.”

Coldwell and Tedso kept filming, moving closer, finding new angles.

“Aint ruinin’ ‘im,” Spade said. “Every horse got to have a maiden run.”

“True enough,” Charlie said. “But don’t gotta be today. He aint ready. Feel yore horse, Spade. He’s locked hisself off from the world.”

“Cause he’s set on go,” Spade said.

“You ‘xpect me to watch ya ruin ‘im?” Charlie said.

“Don’t rightly care what you do, Mister Barnes. But I ask you to do one thing. Be me for one sorry-assed minute. Now don’t think me ungrateful for what you’ve done, Mister Barnes. But all you preach lately is wait, wait, wait. I been waitin’ all my life, seems to me, almost twenty-six years. And there,” he nodded toward Coldwell, “there stands my chance to be *somebody* right now. Don’t take that from me, Mister Barnes, please.”

What he really needed, I’d come to understand, was Charlie’s hand on his shoulder and the fatherly drawl, “You matter to me now, Son,” that no man he respected had ever uttered. That might’ve smoothed the wild out of him.

“You wanna be famous for ruinin’ this horse?” Charlie said.

“Don’t much matter how,” Spade said. “So long as I get there.”

Just when I’d begun to wonder how long they could sit there staring straight ahead, all the conflict Coldwell could’ve ever craved strutted in the side door and waved as wildly to Spade as if she’d spied him in a crowd.

“Thought I axed ya not to keep her overnight any more,” Charlie said.

“Didn’t,” Spade said, as surprised as Charlie was. He watched Mercedes, his eyes and face softening as she came closer decked out again in her ragamuffin flak jacket, those long red locks swaying in step below her striped railroader’s cap.

“Just materialized plumb from Tulsa on her own?” Charlie said.

“Far as I know,” Spade said.

“By invitation,” Coldwell said, his voice breaking. “Mine. Please forgive if I’ve committed a faux pas.”

“Yore reason?” Charlie said. I pictured him nailing up a new Estragin-Free sign before noon using Coldwell’s head for a hammer, then tacking his limp little body to it, boots up.

“To discuss a potential modeling assignment,” Coldwell said. “I’ve established new contacts.”

“Is *that* right?” Charlie said.

“I’ve no script,” Coldwell said as if someone had asked. His hungry eyes frisked Mercedes and, as if to taunt Spade, he offered her the sweetest little smile this side of Disneyland. Mercedes ignored him, looking only at Spade.

“Reality is reality,” Coldwell said. He cast a sideways peek at Mercedes and deepened his voice. “Spade suggested I film his first run on Roman.”

Charlie showed no surprise at that fact.

“My horse,” Spade said. He sent Mercedes a *stay-out-of-this* glance. “My future.”

“Horse aint half paid for,” Charlie said.

“That’s my point,” Spade said. “You know better than anybody how little we keep of what we win. And I damn sure don’t get well on my puny cut of what work I do here. I aint got no Shannon. Nor any other sponsors, not yet anyway. Maybe this film deal won’t happen. Maybe it will. But it damn sure won’t if we don’t give Coldwell somethin’ to sell. It’s my best chance at quick lick. What else I got?”

Charlie lifted his huge hand and lay it on Spade’s shoulder. Spade flinched, sending a shudder through Roman, but left it lay. And he didn’t fight when Charlie pulled him closer as if

he meant to say something so low nobody, especially Coldwell, could hear. Later Spade told me that it was one word, a word Charlie spoke in a tone reserved for prayer. In answer to Spade's question, "What else I got?" Charlie had offered the one thing that Spade owned more of than he did: "Time." That's not to say Spade heard him in a meaningful way. I've since come to believe that we hear not with our ears but with our experiences. It's like when a kid first hears the word "hot" but touches the stove anyway. It's not poor hearing that gets the kid burned. It's a lack of experience with what the word means. And so it was with Spade, and maybe even with me, who, because we had not seen as much of our futures turn to past as Charlie had that we could not grasp the meaning of time as Charlie knew it and as Coldwell — who always seemed to understand beyond his understanding — would later use against him. What Spade said next, completely ignoring Charlie's wisdom, we all heard because he squared his shoulders and talked to the cameras as if they were his sole hope of being heard.

"Be honored if you'd haze this run, Mister Barnes."

Charlie glared at the cameras so fiercely I don't know how Coldwell and Tedso stayed in the barn. And even now I cannot claim to understand why Charlie let them. We've never talked about it. But he glared until his grizzled face caved in on itself and calmed.

"Ride out with me," he told Spade. And Spade, to my surprise, did it.

"Ya'll camp here," he told Coldwell as he rode past. He talked low to Spade as they rode with their backs to us. Coldwell, snatching Mercedes' hand, towed her to my rail perch.

"Are they okay?" Mercedes asked. Whatever she felt for Spade, it seemed real enough to tick Coldwell.

"They're majestic," he said, aiming his camera at me. "Like father, like son. Had they engaged in the ten-steer duel Mister Barnes proposed, who would've won?"

"They were going to duel?" Mercedes said.

"Figuratively speaking," Coldwell said. He wanted me to answer who would've won.

"Whoever threw the most steers in the least time," I said. Coldwell lowered his camera. He looked down the arena. Spade and Charlie had rounded the far end and were coming

back, Roman and Casper quick-stepping on loose reins. I was glad to see Roman relaxed. Coldwell's precious golden dust puffed from their hooves into the light rays poring through the roof panels.

"Who's winning now?" he said.

"You are," I said. "If it's conflict you crave."

"It was present long before my arrival, Chance. The camera merely records. Tension is a vital ingredient in my profession, perhaps *the* vital ingredient."

He seemed to want my understanding, but I couldn't give it. I felt dirty knowing I'd been lured by my own vanity into what seemed each day to be more of a trap. Coldwell filmed Charlie and Spade riding closer, Spade calmer, Roman calmer. I wanted to take the big roan for a slow lope across the blue-stem meadow and save his mind. Cameras filming, Mercedes went to Spade and stroked as Roman's big bent nose with worried fingers as if it were a rattler. Spade meant enough to her that she'd overcome her equine phobia. Her presence only seemed to set Spade's jaw a little solider, especially when he eyed Coldwell. Charlie squinted at the steer in the chute.

"That Shorty?" Charlie asked. We'd named a chocolate colored steer Shorty because he was the kind to let a man win a short-go.

"It's him," I said.

"Score one," Charlie told Spade. He meant for Spade to set Roman in the box, nod for the steer, then let the steer run without chasing. To teach horses patience and to keep them honest, they need about as many steers scored on them as they run.

"One this good?" Spade said. His tone was lighter, playful.

"We can bring 'im back," Charlie said. I took my place astraddle the chute to work the lever. Spade did as he was told, scoring three straight steers before Charlie let him spur Roman past a slow steer without bending a knee just to see how Roman handled the action. Roman blasted by the steer in perfect position as if he had a million runs on him, but once by the steer something snapped in his head as so often does the first time a horse runs by one, and he bounced off the back wall before lapping the arena in a runaway sprint that sent Coldwell and

Tedso hustling behind a gate.

Spade rode back grinning his wild grin. Roman was lathering under his breast collar and blankets again, slinging his nose, jiggling in place.

“He’s ready,” Spade said. He came back giddy and hatless, his black hair laid flat by the wind.

Charlie shook his head no.

“Ready to run through a wall,” Charlie said. “Best score a few more and call it good.”

“Good?” Spade said.

“Feel yore horse,” Charlie said.

Charlie nudged Casper against Roman again and put his hand over Spade’s on Roman’s reins. Coldwell stepped closer, camera on.

“Feel that?” Charlie said. Roman’s nose pumped against the reins. “He’s telegraphin’ ya that it aint time yet.”

“I been patient, aint I?” Spade said.

“Keep on bein’,” Charlie said. “What if it’s tomorrow or next week?”

Spade sat quiet, thinking, his hand easy on Roman’s sweaty neck.

“I’ve promised footage tonight,” Coldwell said.

“What the hell ya got in yore camera now?” Charlie said. “Yore gettin’ the kinda lesson guys’ll pay money to learn. You’ve seen ‘em do it.”

“Very well,” Coldwell said. “Wait it is. But I must volunteer that several potential producers are excited to witness the run on Roman that Spade proposed. As a side story, they like the entire narrative of the horse’s origin on the reservation to his initiation as a professional steer wrestling horse. Viewers love animal stories. And Native American is in vogue.”

“They won’t know Roman from Casper,” Charlie said. “We’ll plug in another horse like you tried to sub Mercedes for Shannon.”

“I did give my word,” Spade said.

“You ought not,” Charlie said.

“But I did.”

“He did,” Coldwell said. He seemed smaller than ever looking up at those guys, but the camera, like the Colt .45 that had done in the west of old, served as the great equalizer. Charlie went through his thinking ritual of spitting his Cope and packing a fresh chew.

“If yore that set on ruinin a horse,” he said, “I need yore word that you’ll work off the debt if things go wrong.”

Where Charlie expected things to go wrong, I allowed, was in Spade’s mind. Charlie had intended me for Roman’s test pilot because we all knew that no matter how well Spade bulldogged, which was sporadic at best, he’d never learned to ride right according to Charlie’s definition. So Charlie had mounted him all year on such dead solid horses that all Spade needed to know was nod and kick and not break the string, which he still too often broke. Like Roman, he could be so much better than he knew how to be just then, if only he’d been patient.

“You know I’m good for it,” Spade said.

Charlie let go a long breath, sagging as he did. They rode into the boxes, Spade edgy and glancing from Mercedes to Coldwell to Charlie and, finally, to me astraddle the chute as I waited for his nod.

“Rib to the pen?” Spade asked Charlie.

“Shoulder,” Charlie said. “Let’s keep things in this end of the pen.”

Spade looked to Charlie, not so much checking for readiness as challenging his authority. I didn’t realize the degree of it until I saw Coldwell’s footage later. Roman pitter-patted his front hooves and squirmed in the corner, feeling Spade’s nerves all the way to his jerky nod. I tripped the gate. Shorty the steer broke in a nice long stride, but Roman had come untrained. He reared almost over backwards and came down sideways in the box, stumbling to his knees. Charlie had left with the steer but watched the wreck over his shoulder. He seemed shocked when Spade came spurring.

“Late!” Charlie yelled. “Rein up or ride by!”

He had Casper tight on the steer, holding him straight, but steer faded hard left into the

vacuum where Roman should've been. Spade could have and should have reined up, but he seemed hell-bent on defying Charlie. There was a blue blur of speed and then godawful clacking of hooves when Roman rammed the steer as it drifted into his path. Roman's legs tangled like egg-beaters with the steer's legs. The steer folded and rolled, taking Roman rolling with him. From where I sat, the steer completely vanished for a second then flashed to the top like a fish leaping from a bucket only to disappear again behind Roman's empty saddle and rolling rump on the second spin. Whatever remained of Spade was somewhere in the dust. I dove and ran. Charlie came spurring Casper back and landed running. He threw his body over Spade before the steer gained his feet, the three that still worked right, that is. The steer hobbled away carrying his left hind, the hoof swinging slowly like a hypnotist's watch.

I sprinted to Charlie. Coldwell and Tedso trotted behind. Mercedes raced along screaming. Spade lay on his left side, crumpled as a gum wrapper, his eyes open but fixed and shiny as black stones. Coldwell dropped to a knee and kept filming, panning all our faces in that golden light Spade that Spade likely couldn't see. Or maybe it was all he saw.

"Nobody lift on him," Charlie said. Nobody had tried to. Charlie knelt and put his hand on Spade's dirt-caked forehead and said his name real quiet several times. Mercedes, who'd been bobbing in place with her doubled fists held tight to her mouth, dropped to the dirt beside Charlie and touched her fingertips to Spade's filthy shirt. She eased her ear to his heart. Whatever she heard must've pleased her. She smiled a sheepish little smile as if her being there was as right as it was wrong. After one of those too-long minutes, Spade squirmed and spit dirt. He let go a big cough. His eyes saw us seeing him, and his whole body jerked as if he'd grabbed a hot shot. He lifted a hand to Mercedes' face, tried to sit, but groaned and lay still. Mercedes kissed his fingers, her eyes bold now, not caring what we thought.

"How's Roman?" Spade said.

Coldwell said low to his camera, "His first concern is for his horse. Amazing!"

"It that was true," Charlie snarled, "this wouldn't have happened." Then he answered Spade.

“It’ll take a year to undo those ten seconds,” Charlie said. “And now you owe me for the busted-legged steer. Can you move anythin’ ‘sides yore damn jaw?”

Spade raised himself to his elbows and worked his eyes. He lifted one boot, then the other, then opened and closed both hands.

“Feel like the dog that caught the car,” he said.

“Damn lucky you can feel a’tall,” Charlie said. “Any need to call my inshorance man?”

“Not unless he’ll cover the steer,” Spade said. He groaned and shifted himself to a sitting position, then drew his legs to him. “Wouldn’t want to get your rates raised.”

“Call it tuition in the School of Life,” Charlie said. Elena, who must’ve sensed something, materialized over us with a crucifix in hand. I’d never seen her in the arena.

“Es el trabajo del Diablo,” Elena sobbed. “The work of the devil.”

“It was just another damn arena wreck,” Charlie said. “Caint ya keep yore religion separate from yore superstition?”

“Lo mismo,” Elena said. “They are the same. Holy spirits speak their secrets to me because I listen with my soul. Did you not hear the cock crow at midnight?”

Spade worked himself to his hands and knees and finally got vertical.

“See?” he said to Elena. He dusted himself and flashed her that big toothy grin. “It’s fine. If there was any devil involved, it’d be me.”

“Yo se,” she said, “I know.” And more tender now, “Maldito.”

Real spooky like, Elena stoked Spade’s forehead then tore for the house. I thought she’d nicknamed him, and in a way she had. “Maldito” meant “cursed.” I looked it up later for Coldwell in the Spanish pocket dictionary I’d kept from college. The word affected little Coldwell. He sat on my ratty couch with that faraway gaze in his boyish blue eyes.

“Maldito,” he said, “mal-di-to.” He let the word lie on his tongue and lips, saying it as wistfully as he said Mercedes.

“Have you ever marveled, Chance, at the beauty with which romance languages assuage the sting?”

“Likely ‘cause we don’t know what they mean,” I said.

“Cowboy pragmatism,” he said. “Always keeping it real. Keeping it real.”

At the time, we still believed him.

Chapter Twenty-One

In the category of Dreams Sort of Come True I *was* at last in Charlie's rig and headed to the NFR. Charlie, Spade, and I owned the front seat of Charlie's sweet new club cab Dodge dualie. Tedso and Coldwell claimed the back. We were rumbling with the bird-dog on across five states to Vegas, bleary-eyed Spade holding the donut as that big Cummins diesel bellowed down one mountain and leaned into the next long winding climb. I, Chance Hendrix, was sure enough hauling with Charlie Barnes to the NFR. That *was* true. But I was going as a glorified stall swamper, no matter if I had lined my skinny wallet with a pro card and throwed as many steers right in the last month as any of the Top Fifteen.

In the too much time I had for thinking as the rig rolled west, my moods spun. Because I had been bulldogging so well, by Charlie's own measure, I knew I was ready for the Buildings. But since the big rodeos were limiting entries to the top money winners from the year before, I wasn't eligible even if Charlie would've okayed it. And I wasn't eligible because I'd been mucking stalls and riding colts at Charlie's instead of entering some of the better late-season rodeos that might've let me get into Denver, Houston, Ft. Worth, and other major Building rodeos. I'd started to think I'd done wrong trading myself to Charlie. I knew better. If I hadn't been at Charlie's I wouldn't have been good enough to resent not going to the Buildings. But logic seldom reins in emotion.

Another problem was that I'd bad disappointed my folks by skipping Thanksgiving. I'd earned their forgiveness only when I promised a week with them at Christmas, though they likely thought I'd no-show them. Thoughts of holidays brought back my ex-sweet little rich girl, who'd pampered me with clothes, cologne, and crazy loving from own my personal Santa's Helper. For much of the drive to Vegas, my mind like to spurred itself raw with debt and regret until I recalled Daddy's "some things are just meant to be" thinking. I scolded myself into feeling happy with where I was. I was, after all, in the Barnes' camp. I was getting as good as I needed to be. Charlie said so. Soon enough, I'd to start my run at world. My folks might never be proud of their cowboy kid, but winning could sure enough ease their shame.

I was a tad uneasy, too, over the strange new tingle of the drug called fame, even if it I'd tasted only a child's dose. Regardless how Coldwell annoyed me, I'd started liking the attention he'd gathered. The little man could promote his "product." A week before the NFR, in hopes of teasing out a major player, he'd launched a YouTube web site called *The Just-Enough Club*, www.thejustenoughclub.com, that showed clips and interviews of us he'd filmed at Charlie's. "Product samplers," he'd called them.

"I prefer to perceive of the site as a wine tasting for the wired," he told us. Though his new site had yet to produce a producer, it sure enough drew lots of hits. Guys I seldom saw, some who didn't even rodeo, got my cell number. They called me coyote and asked how did I worm my way into Charlie's camp. And always, always, always, they dogged me about Lucy and Mercedes. Guys from Argentina, Albania, and the Ukraine posted email innuendoes about me, Spade, about the girls, punctuating with winks and smiles.

Each evening that week Coldwell had gathered us around Charlie's scarred kitchen table beneath Elena's scowl to scan the day's postings with him, at least the ones he cared to show. I could ignore the jabs, but I couldn't ignore the complicated feeling of having strangers think they knew me. Lucy called to demand that Coldwell get her off his site. Spade and Mercedes loved it. Charlie at first said nothing to Coldwell but allowed to me in private he thought it a Trojan horse. Pathetic women emailed pics, phone numbers, and sometimes dumb jokes about riding bareback or else limericks that rhymed with buck. Guys sent real cards and flowers addressed to Mercedes and Lucy, care of Charlie's barn — all within the first week.

But the most damning damage found us through the interactive component he'd secretly just added to let viewers post potential plot lines — for our real lives, mind you — and vote for their favorites. Coldwell concealed this tidbit from us until he'd conned Charlie into letting him and Tedso join the Vegas run. Though I'd expected him to talk us deaf, he'd burrowed into his virtual tunnel and stayed there until I-44 left the Oklahoma Panhandle for New Mexico. Camped in the back seat with Tedso, Coldwell kept loading the site on his wireless laptop wherever he could pick up the spotty signal. In the open cactus country before Amarillo he read suggestions:

“Form coed teams to compete for the most total points. Add events such as cooking with Dutch ovens, pulling calves, and changing trailer tires.”

“That had to be wrote by some leathery ranch wife,” Charlie snarled. “She knows the deal.”

Coldwell had just confessed the interactive thing a few miles earlier, and I half expected Charlie to hurl Coldwell’s laptop out a window at eighty miles an hour, Coldwell folded around it. Or maybe inside it, his little carcass riddled with keyboard indentations like a waffle in an iron. Charlie’s motto, no matter who he hauled or where they were entered, was *No trouble in the truck*. He’d evicted quarrelsome major players at truck stops and rest areas across America.

“*Yore* plot’s the one what interests me,” he said to Coldwell. He talked over his shoulder, head angled, watching Coldwell’s image in the rearview instead of turning in the tight space between Spade and me. I’d wedged myself against the passenger door so I could see Coldwell’s expression as he scrolled through the postings. His little brow scrunched at times. Other times he’d frown or giggle and say nothing, as if he were editing what he chose to tell. Now he sat with his shoulders hunched, listening to Charlie’s tone the way a rabbit crouched in a grass clump hears a stalking cat’s purr.

“It was one mighty crooked road that led from documentary to YouBoob,” Charlie drawled. “I don’t need no plot ideas to tell me where this deal ends.”

“YouTube,” Coldwell said, forcing a smile. He was moxie run amuck, a flurry of motion and words. He read to himself as he spoke, his eyes devouring texts, his fingers tapping the keyboard, his mouth making words. “We are of our culture, Mister Barnes.”

“Aint mine,” Charlie said. “I aim to live my own life the way the Arena Gods got me entered up. Need no help from e-geek strangers.”

If Coldwell sensed how near he was to becoming road kill, he hid it well.

“Our lives are no longer insular,” he said. “We’re constantly under surveillance. The existential question is whether we profit from the trend or surrender.” He paused, priming us against surrender.

“A product needs a market, preferably global. May I share that we’ve surpassed three-thousand hits our first week? That’s marketable. We’re building an audience that will draw investment capital. The results, as you can tell, astound even me. I assure you that this will draw capital, not merely a producer but sponsors for your rodeoing. And who here doesn’t seek additional capital? Think of the attention you can bring to your sport! Have I answered your question, Mister Barnes?”

“’bout like ya always do,” Charlie said.

“May I, then, have your permission to keep the site?”

“Til I think on it more,” Charlie said. He peered hard at the rearview. Things rode quiet for awhile, Spade, Charlie, and I talking about the other dogging horses that’d be in Vegas and who all might want on Charlie’s horses. But it was one of those times when words rode along on unspoken undercurrents of lines on a screen we couldn’t see as I glanced over my shoulder. A few times I caught Spade and Charlie peeking in the rearview as we talked. Miles passed. We rumbled past the Arizona State Line sign.

As we snaked through a snow squall in the tall-pine mountains outside Flagstaff, something on the screen snatched Coldwell’s attention. Whatever it was lent the feel of a siren to the air. He read it over and over, his boyish blue eyes fluttering up and around the cab before landing again on the screen, wild as stable flies. He elbowed Tedso. Tedso glanced at me as if to tell Coldwell I was watching. Coldwell fired me an odd expression and slowly — in a way I am ever more certain than ever that he meant to convey something profound — nodded *Yes* as if we’d agreed to whatever the screen held. It was the kind of silence we all heard, the kind that makes people listen, the kind that you feel like a damp chill.

“May as well say it,” Charlie said.

“Prefer not,” Coldwell said. He paled, then blushed, his eyes asking me to calm Charlie.

“Reach me that goddamn thing,” Charlie ordered me.

As I turned to pry the laptop from Coldwell, he lowered his eyes and began to read as if he were the opening speaker at a child’s wake, so softly we strained to hear. His tone tottered

between reverent and apologetic as he battled words in an order that didn't fit his mouth.

“This person writes, and I quote, ‘You guys need a plot? See how you like this tale. The old geezer gets jealous of the pretty boys and their pretty gals. Starts checking each morning to see how much his balls shrunk since yesterday. He aint got looks enough nor money enough left to draw the women he fools himself into thinking he ought to have. Follow? But he thinks he might could still bulldog good enough to bait himself a long-toothed buckle bunny. And if that fails, he might could win respect, could show the kids he's still stud of the hay meadow. How am I doing so far? Beating those kids would be good as beating time itself. Every card-carrying AARP member in America would watch. What else old farts do but watch TV and read? How's it end for the old guy? We all know, but I won't spoil it by saying. I will say fuck you, Charlie Barnes.’”

A new kind of quiet filled the truck like gas fumes leaking next to a kiln. I told myself I'd not look at Charlie. Like so many lies born as truths, I meant it when I said it. But I couldn't help looking. His jaws locked like a steel wolf trap, his eyes burning into the horizon, his blood bulging the veins of his throat and temples, Charlie tolerated it for awhile. I imagined him mentally cataloguing the names of his enemies in search of the one to kill. I'd applied many an adjective to Charlie, but “old” was never in the bunch. I saw, though, that rodeo and the road and “time itself” as the post claimed, separated him from Spade and me like a wall with a one-way door. It was one of those times when somebody says or does something and you never see someone the same way again. Charlie was gray and grizzled, sure enough, his leathery red face etched by a zillion miles of squint, veins visible and crooked as red highways on a map. He'd become a tad thick-middled. A razor-nicked wattle dangled from chin to Adam's apple. And he made no secret of his battles with Sir Arthur and hemorrhoids.

That aside, though, his big old shoulders stood solid as Rushmore. He could still sit most any horse and wave soggy steers at the crowd better than anybody I'd seen go. I didn't doubt he could choke whoever sent that post until that guy's eyes exploded — and would. Nor did any of us, I was sure, doubt that he could make another respectable run at the world. Suddenly, I

wondered his reason for not. And I wondered how that big strong heart of his was taking the insult. If Charlie didn't want us to know his feelings, he was so used to playing through pain that we'd never know. He gathered himself to talk.

"Don't s'pose there's a way to know who sent that," he said. He flashed me a wry grin and a wink that Coldwell must've noticed. His tone lightened.

"Apparently one of your dearest friends," Coldwell said, risking rare sarcasm. He peered at the screen and tapped keys. "The moniker reads, 'BALLBUSTER4U.'" He described how it looked and said, "The sender possessed not only a cruel sense of humor and but also adequate computer control to block a response."

"That 'eliminates everybody I know," Charlie said. He raised his eyes to the rearview and waited for Coldwell to meet his gaze. "'cept you."

Coldwell seemed set to joke again until he saw Charlie's eyes and felt the sharpness of his tone.

"I . . . I . . . I," Coldwell stammered. He turned to Tedso, who chewed his gum slowly, his eyes two small black beads, his broad bear head as still and wooden as a carving. Coldwell gathered himself and again faced Charlie's eyes in the rearview.

"That's hardly a voice I could mimic," he said. "Nor would I stoop to inflicting injury on your character, Mister Barnes. How can you *not* know that?"

"Cause I keep tellin' ya the word *character* don't mean the same thing to you as to me."

Spade asked did Charlie want him to turn off at the next rest stop, which a sign had announced would be three miles ahead.

"Naw," Charlie said. "Druther pitch the corpses out where possums can feast til some hiker finds the bones."

Tedso stroked his chin, frowning. Coldwell laughed a desperate laugh and gave Charlie's shoulder a nervous pat.

"Whatever your suspicions, Mister Barnes, you know I'm too much a businessman to risk our alliance." He tapped his keyboard. "I'll request that our server trace the post immediately.

Would that satisfy you?”

“Will they give me a name?”

“Perhaps,” Coldwell said, “though unlikely. They can provide an IHP number, which identifies the computer.”

“Then we gotta break in every house in America lookin’ for it?”

“Essentially,” Coldwell said. “You will see, however, that the post did not originate from my computer.” He tapped his laptop for emphasis. “You know, too, that I’ve lacked access to any other computers. I’ve been in your presence for the entire week, have I not?”

The question needed no answer. Charlie lowered his eyes from the rearview and squinted into the snow spiraling at the windshield. We were fighting a head wind that rocked us whenever the highway strayed too wide from the tree line.

“Just another focken YouBoob genius,” Charlie said at last. He twisted in the seat and dangled his arm over it, his index finger cocked and aimed at Coldwell’s laptop. “However long it takes to get us out of there, every trace of us, that’s how long I’m givin’ ya.”

Coldwell, instead of shrinking, met Charlie’s gaze with one more determined than I’d thought him to own. He wasn’t trying to smile. He’d fallen under the spell of a sudden bold calm that — to my thinking — surprised him as much as anybody.

“Very well,” he said, his voice calm and bold. “Without appreciation and despite accusations, I *have* established market. Interest is there, as I believed it to be.”

He waited in Charlie’s rearview glare, all of us hearing the rising, unfinished tone of what he’d said as if he’d ended with “but . . .” And when he gathered the nerve to finish, he spoke Charlie’s language.

“My question, Mister Barnes, is, ‘Why did you quit?’”

He raised his camera to film Charlie’s answer, all of us surely expecting the order from Charlie to lower it. But the order never came. Charlie seemed to welcome it. He relaxed, as if glad for the audience. I imagined myself in a crowded theater, staring up at Charlie’s broad, grizzled face, and I knew Coldwell was right about market. Who could walk away from a man

whose every word bored half a century deep in cowboy lore he'd lived? Coldwell's gimmicks would sell the first tickets, and word-of-mouth would sell the rest.

"Man don't quit rodeo," Charlie said. "It quits him. We neither of us quit yet. Won close to twenty grand this year, winner's checks completely separate from mount money, jackpots, schools, horses sold, and the like. Just pick my rodeos more careful these days, is all. Man can get by not knowin' lots of things in this sweet life. But the man what don't know himself is doomed. Hell, I aint thirty no more. Nor forty. At forty, Butch Myers won the world back in '80. Roy Duvall made the '94 NFR when he was 52. I qualified in the twelfth hole at forty-two, finished two holes out at forty-five, three years ago. You can do yore own 'rithmetic on my age."

He grinned that big gat-toothed grin, swept a hand over his silvering auburn hair, and allowed, "Though I don't look a day past twenty."

He set his lid back in place and turned serious. Wind rocked the truck. Horses shifted in the trailer each time the rig slipped a little on the snowy pavement. We were winding down the mountain now, Spade light on the brakes, using gears. The soft pretty snow of fifteen minutes earlier had gained size, force, and meanness, huge swirling flakes fighting for space as the stiffening wind spun them at our windshield. Charlie felt his rig on a road he'd long memorized and trusted Spade to learn. He seemed to trust Spade, if only to trick Coldwell. The defroster worked on high, but still the side windows fogged from the whiteout, giving the camera a gauzy backdrop for Charlie's monologue when Charlie turned to face Coldwell.

"There came a time my body felt things in ways it didn't used to. Shoulders ached from the miles holdin' the donut. Ribs throbbled from set-up steers that throwed up their heads for forty-mile-an-hour wrecks. Spine creaked from green horses that reared over backwards in the box. The time came when I knowed I could go hard as I had been for maybe a little longer or go easier for a lot longer. If I meant to last, I needed to cut back. Didn't have no more full years or hammerin' it from The Buildings to the NFR left in me. Half a year, maybe, but aint no NFR for half years. So here I am, camera man Coldwell, haulin' horses for other guys to ride, and haulin' kids whose tomorrows outnumber their yesterdays. But I'm still gettin' paid to haul down the

road that rodeo paves.”

Coldwell shifted in the seat and panned our faces, then lowered the camera. It was as if the slots in his mind had tumbled suddenly into place behind those boyish blue eyes like three bars on a slot machine. His expressions and gestures signaled, strangely, a caution he’d never shown us. It was as if the danger, the magnitude, the promise, of his sudden new vision frightened even him. He spoke softly, his tongue oddly stubborn with words, and slowly, his blue eyes distant while he revealed his scheme as if experiencing a vision or trying to recall a dream in that dream-like blizzard. As we rumbled toward Vegas on snow-packed hairpins in the land of the Grand Canyon, Coldwell pitched us *The Just-Enough Club* in what would become — we saw too late — a double-barreled reality.

In one barrel was the “documentary” Coldwell proposed that would match Charlie against Spade for a period of time to be negotiated. He grabbed our seat on both sides of Charlie’s dangled arm and drew himself forward, eager.

“Correct me if I err, but would it be accurate to state that your pro calendar is similar to an EKG, a series of peaks and valleys: The Buildings, Cowboy Christmas, major holidays, and the NFR?”

As if he sensed the need to document the deal as it formed, Coldwell kept his camera running.

“That might could ‘scribe the pattern,” Charlie said, “but aint that simple. Lots of great rodeos don’t fit. Calgary, Cheyenne, Pendleton, Sydney, Cow Palace, American Royal. And that ignores the Coors Chute Out, Dodge Truck Series, Wrangler Pro Tour, and the high-dollar jackpots. What’s yore point?”

“My point,” he said, “is that all contests require established starting and stopping points. You said earlier, Mister Barnes, that you’d prefer six months. Correct?”

“More or less,” Charlie said. He worked his chew. “Little fudge room.”

“And you’d both prefer Denver be our inauguration?”

“Didn’t say I’d prefer anything,” Charlie said. “Truth told, I might *prefer* you and yore

camera get on the first plane out of Vegas.”

Coldwell, for the first time I'd seen it, seemed truly defeated. His eyes suddenly cold and hollow, his face colorless, he lowered his camera and started to case it.

“So it shall be,” he said. “You’ve become a rather ungracious host, Mister Barnes.”

“He’s jokin’,” Spade said. “Aint ya, Mister Barnes?”

We all knew he wasn't. I don't know and never will know Charlie's thinking just then. I don't know if he felt he'd cheated Spade of his chance for fame. I don't know if his own pride gored him. I do know that he wore the cold, fixed expression he called his “game face,” the one he fixed right before he nodded for a steer to be released. It's the face every cowboy gets before he nods. It means he's ready to do something quick, risky, and violent. It means he knows what can happen, best and worst. And it means that since he's already in the box or chute there's no other way out for a man who wants to stay a man.

“Denver sounds right,” Charlie snarled, “since we've already missed the Cow Palace and the Royal.” Those rodeos, the Cow Palace in Frisco and the Royal in Kansas City, officially launched the new rodeo year although they were held in November.

“That fit yore program, Spade?” Charlie said.

“It's a natural high,” Spade said.

Coldwell took out his tape recorder and spoke the date, location, and destination into it before speaking to Charlie and Spade.

“If the contest is to begin in Denver,” he said, “where shall it culminate?”

“Gotta have Cowboy Christmas,” Spade said. “My best lick.”

Cowboy Christmas is the term for the rich rodeos that span the Fourth of July week. The guys out to win the world often catch flights from rodeo to rodeo and rely on their own ground crews or guys like Charlie to keep top horses under them. Last year Spade had been hot as fast-food grease over that bleary streak of days. Ten of thousands could be won in days, but it demanded that a guy gain a stack of frequent flier points, some of them in single-engine gas bottles that could land on a flatbed semi.

“Won eleven-five in nine sweaty days last summer,” Spade reminded us. He puffed his chest and flashed his big bright smile in Charlie’s face as if to recall the twenty-five percent mount money he’d paid to him. Charlie contemplated the stakes and odds of their proposed competition.

“If we’re goin through Cowboy Christmas,” he drawled, “might as well add Cheyenne.”

Coldwell didn’t take Charlie’s meaning, but I did. So did Spade. Cheyenne runs one of the longest strings of all rodeos, a thirty-foot head start for cattle in a pen bigger than most ranchettes. And they run big, strong, virgin stock in the first round. Some steers mosey out sniffing clods as if hunting a blade of grass and don’t run a step until the horses come clattering. Others rear out with their tails curled over their spines and sling dirt off their flying hooves until they hit the far fence, which is way far at Cheyenne. Most other rodeos any more are lap-and-tap deals on barrier strings so short a guy sometimes chucks the reins to his horse the instant he nods. That lets doggers catch cattle close to the chute before anything hits full speed and sometimes leaves a five-second run last place in the round. Not so at Cheyenne. Guys clatter so far and fast ahorseback that their eyes tear up on the way to mush-hog steers that have never been caught. Like all rodeos, a lot of Cheyenne lies in the luck of the draw. But if two guys draw similar steers, the winner will be the guy who best scores cattle, meaning the one who doesn’t break the barrier but who isn’t far off it when the steer springs it open, and the guy who can best jockey a horse into position in open country. Spade had whiffed at Cheyenne the year before, missing both steers even though Charlie hazed them perfectly. Advantage Charlie. Spade knew it. Squinting into the blizzard, he grinned.

“Fair enough,” he said.

“One thing else,” Charlie said. “Limit it to one rodeo for every year of yore life.” Spade was twenty-five.

“Who picks?”

“You pick twelve. I pick twelve. Big Thump picks the last one just for interest. We’d all likely pick the same ones, anyway.”

“I’m good with that,” Spade said again.

But when the question of hazing arose, they’d found their major balking point. By rights and sportsmanship — likely even for ratings — they’d ought to have hazed for one another, which Coldwell reminded them. He prodded Charlie with Charlie’s earlier comment on trust.

“Aint a question of trust,” Charlie said, his voice gentle with Spade’s ego. “It’s a question of horsemanship. Big-headed as this makes me sound, Spade would have an unfair advantage if I hazed. I’ve been hazin’ since before you boys’ little sperm tales first wagged their way up yore mommas’ stream.”

“I aint no Charlie Barnes,” Spade said. He said it without a whit of anger or sarcasm yet in a flat tone open to multiple meanings. What happened next came like a scene in those old cartoons when a sad-sack character hears a sizzle, smells smoke, and sees an instant before the flash that someone stuck a stick of dynamite in his hind pocket while he was ordering from the ice cream truck.

“Let Big Thump do it,” Charlie said. And then he gave me high praise. “He’s made a hand now.”

We all turned to Spade, whose dark brooding eyes locked on the falling white highway where it turned back on itself and vanished around the turn below. Our trailer tried to pass us on the snow pack, breaking the truck tires’ traction as a climbing eighteen-wheeler’s high beams rounded the bend and drilled through the blizzard into our wide-eyed faces, its air horn blaring as we skidded past. Somehow, while we took a break from breathing, Spade pulled everything straight. Cool as the belly of a pillow, he looked into our wide-eyed wonder as if to say, *What?*

“Good with me,” he said. “Big Thump it is.”

“I have any say in this?” I asked. Charlie seemed set to answer, but tapped his cheek to show he needed to spit. He lifted the Diet Coke bottle spittoon from between his legs, unscrewed the lid, spit a nasty black wad, and went through his slow ritual of packing a fresh dip. We all knew better than to speak. Before closing his tobacco sack he offered it to Spade, who shook him off without lifting his eyes from the highway and then grinning, offered it to me, knowing I’d

puke if I chewed. He folded his sack away and, still grinning, turned to me as if he hadn't stalled for three minutes since I'd asked if I had any say.

"Nope," he said. "No say. Other questions?"

That settled, Coldwell lay down his camera and sealed our pact, unsurprisingly, with a little speech built of big words he seemed to have been rehearsing as he waited.

"Blessed by the triumvirate of classic conflicts," he said, almost whispering. He said it with the boyish sense of wonder that fueled him, his bright blue eyes still distant as if mesmerized by the swirling snow. He leaned forward and touched one hand to Charlie's left shoulder, the other to Spade's right, squeezing them together like a preacher joining newlyweds.

"Man Against Man," he said. He lifted his thin fingers and touched them as he counted conflicts. "Mano y Mano, the primal and primary conflict. Second, Man Against Nature as you battle elements and animals and" He almost said *aging*, I was sure, but his tiptoeing mind replaced it with the more delicate *time*. "Third, and finally, when self-doubts arise as they certainly will, when your character defines its essence under siege, we have Man Against Self."

A subtle change in pitch caused me to turn and find him looking straight at me as he said the "Man Against Self" thing. But he passed it so fast I let it go.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we have the ultimate self-contained reality drama, so perfect that fictionalization would merely dull its luster. This is gold forged from Nature's purest ore."

So, rumbling toward Vegas on a snow-packed Arizona highway in a whiteout, we'd allowed Coldwell's dream to become a double-barreled reality. His documentary plot was the first loaded barrel. The second barrel — the one for which we too late heard the curved steel hammer cock — blasted us with the greater reality that being in a reality show would render our lives unreal. As with the proverbial elephant in the living room, we all knew it was there, but no one wanted to mention it. We knew by the title Coldwell insisted we use: *The Just-Enough Club*.

"Bad luck," Charlie said. "Nobody wants in."

"Precisely," Coldwell said. "We reverse viewers' expectations. As with contestants balancing on a tight wire above a shark's pit, the interest lies in the potential to plunge."

Spade raised his eyes to the mirror.

“Yes?” Coldwell said. Now Spade could be less concerned with the highway that leveled as we left the mountains for rolling ranch country broken by long, lonely driveways and wood smoke from distant chimneys dissolving in mist that replaced the high-country snow. Trucks and cars going east up the mountain were still snow-free, their drivers gawking at our snowed-over rig.

“Money?” Spade said. “It’s a pricey run we’ve set up.”

“Wouldn’t you be entering regardless?” Coldwell said. “Isn’t that what you do?”

“That aint his point,” Charlie said. “He’s askin’ you to do what you do, find sponsors. Didn’t ya say that YouBoob web site would draw money?”

“I did,” Coldwell said.

“What’d ya mean to do with it?” Spade said.

“I’ve costs of my own,” Coldwell said, sounding like Charlie. “Aren’t I paying a share of your fuel? Ted and I have obligations elsewhere.”

I wondered for a minute if he might let slip a few details of his elsewhere life. For as much as he wanted to show our lives naked to the heart, he’d revealed little about his. He worked his mouth, his hands oddly quiet around the camera on his lap.

“You’re absolutely right,” he said. “It is time to market our product. Just please don’t press for hard figures or even percentages. That isn’t how Hollywood or New York operates. We know what we’re marketing. Until, however, we can show them actual footage from the initial month or two they’ll be reticent to discuss numbers. These people will conduct their own market analysis, too, meticulous as actuaries. Forgive the harshness of this statement, but rodeo means to them nothing more or less than the bottom line of spread sheet.”

”And to you?” Charlie said.

“Opportunity,” Coldwell said. “A lens, like a sentence, says nothing without a subject. Still, I am hardly naïve regarding financial commitments. Ted and I will secure a rental and drive to LA.”

Spade's phone rang, blaring the opening riff of Guns and Roses' "Sweet Child of Mine."

"What a sweet child she is," Spade said. He checked the caller, saw it was Mercedes, and folded away his phone without answering, smiling wide as the gap he'd opened between him and Charlie.

"Say it," he teased Charlie. "Tell me to know which head I'm thinkin' with."

"Til we finish Cheyenne," Charlie drawled, "yore fine as ya are."

Spade opened his camera phone then, holding its screen away from us, and, as if Mercedes had sent him a new pic, tongued his lip.

"My queen bee," he said. He stroked himself. "Such sweet honey for Spade's stinger."

Coldwell eased across the seat, his boyish blue eyes so swollen with Longing I was not surprised when he closed them. He turned away, bowed his head, and, I was sure, wept. I likely would've, too, if I'd survived the personal trauma of his life the last few miles. But what holes in his soul the little man thought Mercedes might mend, I could only guess. I wanted to hate him for invading our lives. I wanted to hate him for being weak. Yet I wanted more to lift his fragile little carcass over the seat and plop him on my lap and lie that all would be fine. Tedso, plainly pained, tried glaring me into the secrecy I already meant to keep. I looked to Spade, who rotated his wolfy eyes from Mercedes to the highway and back to her, his dark stubbled face frantic as he keyed in a text message. Charlie looked straight ahead at the road. I told myself to remember that moment. I told myself it held something I wouldn't understand until later. I was right.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I'd never thought Charlie vain. Nor did I think him old. Still don't. But there he stood, before the dressing mirror in his rig, bare-legged and barrel-bellied. Inside the sagging white undershorts, his fruit loomed like a turkey neck astraddle two lopsided eggs. When he thumped his hairy gut, it thudded hollow as a ripe melon.

"I onced had abs like yores," he said. He nodded toward my gut. I'd come from the shower in my skivvies to dress for the second go-round in Vegas, hustling to dress in the desert's evening chill. Coldwell and Tedso had driven a rental car to L.A., and Spade had vanished mid-afternoon while Charlie and I napped. Lance was laid up at the Mirage with Shannon, who was headlining there in designer maternity outfits. Charlie looked again at his belly, then at mine. "Better'n yores," he said, "a good many miles back."

He squeezed his hairy chest, his big hands working like a pushup bra until his nipples jutted pink out of the gray matted chest hair like a white rabbit's nose. He studied the mirror and scoffed.

"Helluva thing, Chance. First girl I lathered up had less tit than I got."

"To hell with that YouTube idiot," I said. "If it's even a real guy, he's too nutless to give his name. Nobody here's owns nerve enough to crave any of your action, Mister Barnes."

Charlie turned back to the mirror and tried to pretend like he was just playing. He stroked his gray beard stubble. He finger-ironed his crows' feet smooth as pancake batter. He hand-brushed his hair, a tangle of silver and red thick and wild as multifloral rose.

"Gray's s'posed to be 'stinguished," he said. "But that word fits me 'bout like a focken rented tux."

He posed and flexed. His big white arms and chest swelled taut as an over-inflated inner tube under a layer of white hide thick from truck stop cooking. His blue eyes paled like the last patch of clear sky before a storm.

"Spade caint match me," he said. "In nor out of the arena."

I didn't answer. His tone carried the forlorn note of a midnight freight train's whistle. I

first laid it to sadness over getting old.

“Aint braggin’” he said. “Nor askin’ ya to take sides. Just tryin’ to get my thinkin’ done out loud. Hell, Spade *knows* he caint take me. His mind’ll beat ‘im. He’s already beat.”

“He’s scorin’ better,” I said.

“Maybe in the practice pen,” Charlie said. And then, as a man’s mind is prone to do, mine told me that Charlie wasn’t sad about the YouTube idiot. He wasn’t sad thinking about Spade beating him. No, he was sad because he knew Spade *couldn’t*. Spade was, I suddenly realized, Charlie’s greatest failure.

“Coach him,” I said, more excited than I ought. “Let Coldwell show *that* to the world.”

“Spade wouldn’t have it,” Charlie said. He said it quick enough I knew he’d long thought of it.

“Don’t ask,” I said. “Tell him. He’ll listen to you.”

Charlie went for his clothes where he’d tossed them on the floor beside the bed and started to dress, socks first as always. His varicose veins rivered long blue lines down his thick white calves. Surgical scars criss-crossed his knees.

“Yore in the worst fix of all,” he said. “Somewhere, someday, yore gonna be late or miss a haze. It’s gonna be honest. You aint got nuthin in ya ‘cept honest.” He stopped and looked at me as if thinking about a fresh chew, then went on. “But honest aint gonna matter, Chance. People’s thinkin’, even wrong thinking, or maybe ‘*pecially* wrong thinkin’, becomes truth. Everybody’s gonna know you sold out whichever one of us it was you missed.”

“Your idea I haze,” I said. Charlie nodded. He hitched his belt, the NFR buckle glittering like an icicle in new sun.

“Damn shore was,” he said. “Partly cause a yore horsemanship. Partly cause ya got a natural sense of timin’. Don’t let that swell yore purty head. Main reason, ya aint got no cheat in ya. I plenty admire yore loyalty, to me and Spade. I don’t mean to turn ya against ‘im, not a’tall. But for yore own well-bein’, ya need to ‘member that you done buddied up with the wild mare’s colt. Spade’s got a hole in ‘im we could drive this rig through. His mind’s brittle as a Christmas

ornament. Knowed it the day he showed.”

“How come you let him in?” I said.

Charlie waited a bit before answering, as if he’d not answered the question to his own satisfaction.

“Thought maybe it was a hole what could be filled,” he said.

“By you?”

He shook his head no.

“By rodeo,” he said. “Same thing that fills the hole in all of us.”

I thought of Shannon, who knows why.

“You believe in God?” I said. Charlie stopped snapping his shirt.

“You turnin’ Jesus on me, Big Thump?”

“No, sir,” I said. “But something about Shannon keeps hold of me. She shed Coldwell easy as horses shed winter hair. Takes better bait than a camera to hook her.”

“Life tastes dif’reent to those what never sucked nothin’ but a golden tit,” Charlie said. “Spade, the poor bastard, lit’rly got weaned with a boot toe stuck in his mouth, a shitty boot at that.”

“Ever wonder how things might be different if he’d met Shannon before Lance did?” I said. I realized I was asking for myself, for my ex-pretty-little-rich-girl, for Lucy. “I mean, how who we meet changes who we are?”

Charlie finished snapping his shirt and reached his Cope from the mattress. He packed a fresh plug and did his thinking, which told me I’d asked him a question he’d not yet answered. While he chewed and thought, I wondered some more what meeting the whole cast meant to me.

“Be no different at all,” Charlie said at last. “He’d a focked her. She’d a liked it when it happened. But if she’d bothered to ask his name, she’d a soon forgot it and went back to her cashy world. He’d kept on hustlin’ up other girls til he found some version of the one what’s got him now. And she’d found herself a Lance by another name. More times than not, folks end up paired right.”

I let that settle a bit before I answered.

“What’s that say about us?” I said.

“That we married rodeo,” he said, not a lick of hesitation. He grinned, theatrical, as if he were on camera now for Coldwell. “The most temptin’ mistress ever to whisper a man’s name.”

“How come she treats Spade so cruel?”

“Cause he aint true. Rodeo’s one sure ‘nuff demandin’ mistress, Big Thump. Hell, look what you gave up. Rodeo demands it all. But for Spade, she’s the means, not the end. Ever time in my life I really satisfied Rodeo, I lost a woman. And ever time I really satisfied a woman, Rodeo got revenge.”

“Lucy know that?” I said. I said it before I knew I was going to.

“Taught it to her myself,” Charlie said. He looked at me as if to ask how long I’d meant to talk around her. “But that don’t totally ‘xplain her.”

“The wreck?” I said, sure I was in one. “Her brother, Evan?”

Charlie snapped closed the throat of his shirt and pocketed his Cope can. Outside, diesel rigs rumbled past, trailers sometimes clanging across the parking lot in tow. Occasionally came the sharp click-clack of shod hooves on pavement, and sometimes voices.

“She’s more daughter to me than niece,” he said. “And, the boy, he was more son than nephew.”

He looked to the big photo framed on the wall, Evan waving slack at the flying calf about to be ripped over backward. The wide-eyed calf horse was sliding on his hind hocks, his tail buried in the arena dirt, clods spraying from his sliding hooves. Evan was standing in the right stirrup, three coils of rope gripped in his right hand as he stepped off for the tie, pigging string clenched in his teeth, his eyes full of hustle and try.

“She aint forgave herself,” I said.

“Who has?” Charlie said. He sighed. “Some things best not said, Big Thump. Other things best not even felt.”

“You can do that?” I said. “Tell yourself not to feel?”

“Plenty guys master their bodies,” Charlie said. “That’s how we ride through pain. But it’s only the real winners who master their minds.” Whether it was because I didn’t answer or because my expression did, he said, “What I’m tellin’ ya is the difference ‘tween bein’ at one of my clinics, Big Thump, and bein’ in my rig. Man what caint rein in his thinkin’ may as well stay to the house.”

I nodded, thinking first of Lucy, Sports Psychologist she meant to be. And then I thought of Spade. I asked Charlie what kept him from giving up on Spade. He’d sent plenty other guys home.

“Hope,” Charlie said, sad like. “Hope can be harder to let go of than a saddle horn in a storm. Keep thinkin’ he’ll come round, get right with the Arena Gods. Or hisself. Whoever he needs to get right with.”

“What if it’s with you?” I said.

“Aint,” Charlie said. He worked the Cope in his jaw. “Aint me. He aint wronged me, not no more than kid stuff.”

“What if it’s not about wrong?” I said. “What if the hole in him is the one where no daddy ever stood?”

“Wasn’t me,” Charlie said. “I’s born sterile as a mule.”

“And as stubborn?” I said. I thought of Lucy’s bluff on the bluff. Somehow, in ways words hadn’t quite explained, I sensed that Spade represented for Charlie the same threat to self-torture as I did to Lucy. His sin was reminding Charlie of the forever lost.

He walked to the door, opened it, and stared idly toward the other rigs packing the parking area. All the lights of Vegas glittered beyond under the blue-black desert sky. How many rodeo lots, I wondered, had the man seen? And what was he seeing now? He leaned against the door jamb.

“You know the only antidote for old age?”

“Die young. Leave a handsome corpse.”

He looked to me, surprised.

“How’d a young stud like you come to know that line?”

“Granddaddy Lash,” I said.

“What’d he allow?” Charlie said. “In his last days, I mean. Did he wish he had? Died young, I mean.”

“Never said so. No, sir.”

Charlie looked again across the parking lot, worked his lip, and spat.

“Ever think ‘bout gettin’ old, Big Thump?”

“No, sir.”

“Don’t.”

Somewhere on the lot a horse whinnied, and the night breeze skimming the desert brought the scent of warm sand. I tried to imagine myself at Charlie’s age, and then at Granddaddy’s when he died. Charlie turned to me as if he read my thinking and talked slow, deep, making his voice old and somber as Moses.

“There’s a golden time, Chance when a man caint quit and still call hisself a man,” he said. “That’s where you boys are. Then there comes a time when a man caint call hisself a man if he *don’t* quit. That’s where the road took yore granddaddy, long b’fore he caught the cancer what killed him. That’s where it’ll lead us all if we miss the right exit.”

“Coldwell be damned,” I said. I floundered to think of something light. “You aint quittin’ til I win my buckle. Nobody ever cussed me every time my heart beat as bad as you.”

That drew only a sad little smile.

“Aint my time to quit,” he said. “But I can see the signs ahead. Tell ya somethin’ else,” he said, “since we’ve done opened the gate to the old and lonely pen, money and memories make sorry bed partners.”

I didn’t answer because something in his tone told me to wait.

“Money and memories make sorry bed partners,” he said.

“Ex-Wife Number Five hidin’ behind the chutes?” I said.

“All I’m sayin’ is a man ought to know what’s gonna plug the hole in his life when

Rodeo dumps his ass. Cause it's gonna happen, sure as death."

I nodded to show I'd heard him, really heard him, and we both knew that I had. We knew it the same as we knew he hadn't been talking to me at all.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Coldwell roared back from L.A. just past midnight on a Tuesday after the fourth perf. He stormed our little crew gathered in Charlie's rig, the light in his bright boyish eyes on high beam, super-fueled with the promise of an overdue payday. The little man jackhammered at the trailer door like a woodpecker on steroids, ripped it open without so much as a "come-in" from anybody, and spun wild-eyed into the dim light. Strangers might have thought him drunk. We just thought him Coldwell.

"They adored you!" he howled. "Lady Fame has found us alas!"

It was an odd statement. It said that nobody in the rig had been famous before. And it took Lance's presence to sober him. Lance had bunked with Charlie because Shannon was answering her muse's summons to write new lyrics in their luxury suite at the Mirage. Lance's sleeping choices since Shannon seemed set on staying awake at her keyboard all night — were either to rent another pricey room or camp with us. He seemed happier with us, anyway, and more than a little spooked by his sweetie's ever more mystical muses.

To settle his mind, we'd talked of other things. We'd interrogated him about their new plane, a sweet little jet they'd just bought to whisk them from rodeo to concert and home again home again to dance a fat jig. With Baby Charlie's E.T.A. now less than two months, Shannon demanded they find ways to spend more family time at their villa outside Nashville. She'd contracted a nanny, who'd already moved in to do whatever nannies tending unborn kids do. Lance allowed she could help the housekeepers dust and scrub. They'd hired a pilot, too, temporarily, to fly them until Lance finished earning his pilot's license, which he aimed to do by New Years. The pilot had dropped them in Vegas and jetted back to Nashville to tend his regular business until the Finals ended. By Denver, Lance said, he'd be in the cockpit.

"I can see the headlines in *Sports News*," Charlie drawled: "Lance Wilkins, PRCA Steer Wrestling Rookie of the Year, Now Officially One High-Flyin' Daddy."

"And I can say I knew him when," Spade goaded, "when he still had balls. Honerdollars say Shannon's gonna have ya dustin' doilies in one of those little French maid dressed

before Cheyenne. Guys are gonna say, ‘Whatever happened to your hauling buddy, Lance?’ and I’m gonna say, “He’s home with Shannon, doin’ her dance, in the dress she handed him, when he took away his pants.’”

He made little smoochie noises for Lance, who ignored him as if he were the drunken brother at Christmas dinner. Spade and I shared the sleeper sofa. Long before Coldwell’s invasion, we’d changed subjects, easing ourselves toward sleep by rehashing the night’s runs. Lance had made his fourth solid trip that night, a slick 4.9 on a speedster steer that Charlie had throttled like an engine governor. The run moved Lance into the top five overall and packed a wad of cash into his and Charlie’s wallets.

Spade, sporadic Spade, had gone unconscious in the blinding Vegas lights, been late to the string, and once again wasted a poodle that guys had placed on in every round. Worse, he’d same as accused Scooter of locking up, which naturally ticked Charlie, who’d bit off his words just four syllables short of yelling, “Stay off my horse!” To train on Spade, instead of going directly at him, Charlie was talking Lance through his plan for Spade’s next steer, a runner that’d “come around the corner real sweet *if* a man gets him caught, and *if* he don’t break out.” That was the uneasy peace into which Coldwell dashed, Tedso shadowing him.

Coldwell practically catapulted through the door. His eyes strafed us, and he seemed set to bury us in an avalanche of big-word optimism until his eyes adjusted enough to recognize Lance, whose beloved Shannon had, of course, shredded every thread of Coldwell’s 20X scheme. The little man had cause aplenty to loathe their mothers for birthing them. And — in the sudden breathless void that silenced him — he must’ve admitted to himself, too, that their fame had drawn him to us. They needed him for nothing and welcomed him for less. He stopped mid-stride, his mind spinning for new traction. Tedso stepped in and leaned against the wall, arms folded, dark and balky as a buffalo. He drew the door behind him, his slitted eyes peering like a turtle’s. Finally Coldwell regained momentum.

“Lance!” he said, beaming. He charged the bed, hand outstretched. “Great to see you! How is the inimitable Shannon?”

How Shannon was — which Lance masked from him — was in the throes of a trance. Lance had come to Charlie's rig more troubled than he meant to show. From the day he'd begun dating Shannon, he told us, he'd known her to be a bit mystical. Visions came full born to her, he said, such as the controversial cover of her *God's Forgotten Daughter* album. Heavenly voices whispered lyrics to her in meditation, prayer, and dreams.

"Yore gal hears voices?" Charlie had asked him.

"Imaginary ones?" Spade said. He almost giggled.

"That's how she tells it," Lance said. "I always knew that songs got to come from somewhere."

He didn't mention the impending lawsuits for copyright violation of songs penned and performed by YouTube ambies. But he did reveal that her latest full-born vision, the one that possessed her that night, was a concept CD titled *My Mother's UnBiblical Chords*. Lance spelled it for us so we'd get the irony. The title song, which she was writing in a fury, was to be an anti-abortion anthem that God had commanded her to create. She was writing it from Baby Charlie's point of view, as if she'd aborted him. She'd become God's vessel, she told Lance, like Virgin Mary. And he allowed that she'd been so glaze-eyed breathless and pained when she told him that he thought she'd gone into early labor. He'd come to us too spooked for sleep, afraid of and for her, too afraid even to call and say where he was when Charlie said he'd likely best, though he couldn't outright own his fear.

"Hormones," Charlie drawled. But he said it with a wariness that made me think he pictured little Charles Wilkins Barnes being yanked red-eyed into this world with calf-pulling chains hooked to his steaming hooves. Seeing Lance so rattled had rattled us all a tad, so we'd talked ourselves calm with rodeo and stayed calm until Coldwell came and asked Lance how was the inimitable Shannon.

"Horizontal," Lance lied. He thumped his gut as if to remind Coldwell of the pregnancy then lied again: "Baby Charlie tapped in at the rodeo dance."

There'd been no rodeo dance.

“Was she the featured artist?” Coldwell said. Lance had derailed his shaky train of L.A. ecstasy. Lance looked to us as if asking if we’d heard the same question, then turned to Coldwell.

“At a rodeo dance?” Lance said. “That’s like asking if you hire out to film family picnics, Dude. Shannon don’t do no stinking rodeo dances. She could pack Caesar’s Palace. For a week. Jeez, man.”

“My faux pas,” Coldwell said. He smiled and tried to lighten the tone. “I misunderstood the dynamics. Her latest release is . . . dare I say, fruitful?” He meant the CD she’d released that fall, *Orange County*, which poked fun at Hollywoodites in prison clothes for DUI, gold-club assault, nose candy, and other routine celebrity mischief. It’d already scaled Top Ten, not because it was much good, but because it was Shannon. Before either of them said anything else, Sweet Child of Spade’s blared in. He snatched his phone, leapt from the couch-bed, and shuffled toward the open john as if he needed privacy. Coldwell blushed at Lance and forced an apologetic smile.

“L.A.?” Charlie coaxed. “Fame and adoration. Did I miss the money part?”

Spade sauntered back and dropped to the sofa bed just as Charlie cued Coldwell to recall his purpose.

“L.A.!” Coldwell yelped, his mind back from Mercedes land. “Yes, L.A.! On coronary pace!” he said. He leaned toward Spade, his little white hands fluttering like butterflies in the low light. He rattled that his L.A. people — who stayed as mysterious to us as the mountains of Mars — had “gone madmadmadmad absolutely *mad!*” over the Spade-Charlie “duel to the death.”

“Whoa,” Charlie drawled. “What shit-slinger puked that garbage?”

He lay on his side, his grizzled red face propped on a palm, his sleepy eyes sizing Coldwell.

“Mere marketing,” Coldwell said, his voice light as a flute. “Distilled drama. You told me that steer wrestlers *have* died in the arena, did you not, Mister Barnes? Clyde Burk, I believe.”

“Damn seldom,” Charlie snarled. He said it as if he meant to keep it that way.

“Of course,” Coldwell said. But he turned to Charlie and pointed to Spade. Coldwell’s

little hand hovered above Spade's shoulder. "Our very own Spade *could* have been a fatality the day Roman rolled on him, true?"

"You showed 'em my wreck?" Spade said.

"And more!" Coldwell said, gleeful. "You should have heard them." He faced Spade and said, "They're already adopting *your* laconic language. It's the raw ore of lore. You're an icon inchoate!"

Spade peered at him, waiting for the translation.

"When the trucker delivered those wild Texas steers —" Coldwell said. He spread his arms as if measuring horns. "Do you recall your response? The moment I asked if you'd intended to assault him?"

Spade didn't.

"When I asked if you'd have struck the trucker, you responded, 'Dunno. Never will.' Do you remember now?"

Spade nodded that he did.

"Well, immediately after I'd screened that scene, an entire chorus of 'Dunno. Never will' erupted from the test audience. You've trademarked yourself. It's the equivalent of Eastwood's 'Go ahead, make my day' or Nicholson's 'You can't handle the truth.' They are most impressed, I assure you. Im-pressed!"

"Over a fight that didn't happen?" Spade said.

"Over everything!" Coldwell said. "Over the steers! Over your sheer cowboy joie de vivre!"

He stepped closer to Charlie, his hands floating ahead of him like a blind man's in a strange room.

"When you so glibly said of those wild steers, 'Might ought to've unloaded 'em outside,'" the audience roared.

"Never meant it comic," Charlie said. But he had. Now he was acting.

"Not comic. *Genuine*," Coldwell said. He laid the word on Charlie light as salve on a

burn. He turned to me. “You people want it real. So do my people.”

“Real damn dangerous,” Charlie said. “Don’t much care for the death duel.”

“Steers at thirty paces,” Spade teased. “How’s about makin’ that the slogan for ol’ Cheyenne, Coldwell?”

“Isn’t that the essence of rodeo?” Coldwell said. His blue eyes flitted face to face looking for a place to perch.

Charlie seemed to be asking himself if he felt up to packing a fresh chew on the back side of midnight. In the short silence, while Coldwell’s energy still charged the air, Charlie left his Cope pocketed in his hung shirt and let his mind do his chewing. The generator hummed when our furnace kicked in.

“This duel-to-the-death shit aint rodeo,” Charlie said. “A man don’t want his haulin’ partners dead —” he glanced at Spade and added, “most days. Seems to me what yore people really want is for somebody to film live Russian Roulette.”

Coldwell jerked as if he’d fingered an electrical socket.

“SPIKE TV already booked that one for next season,” he joked. But we were all wondering if he might zip back to L.A. and pitch the idea before breakfast. He shook his little head tsk-tsk-tsk style, folded his hands, and paced, his head tucked as if he were studying his shoes. The generator moaned. Vegas droned in the distant night. Holding his hands before him like a conductor, Coldwell faced Charlie.

“We’ll massage the language,” he said. Charlie squinted at the little man as if Coldwell had pissed on his new Luchesse boots.

“Aint just the focken *words*,” Charlie drawled. “It’s the focken ideas they’re packin’. Aint gonna be no duels. Nor no deaths neither. Not by any sort of name. Not in my goddamn rig. Hell, Coldwell, whatever happened to filmin’ us just as we are? Or were, I’d best say. The phony drama shit’s got to stop.”

Coldwell seemed ready to argue, but stopped himself mid-word and pursed his mouth. A calm as subtle as night air settled on him. He seemed almost mesmerized. I wondered if the same

muse who'd claimed Shannon had sought new territory in Coldwell, odd as that pairing might have been.

"You are right, Mister Barnes," he said slowly. "Of course." He said it low with a sense of wonder, as if seeing a rainbow for the first time. "They're not mere words. It is most assuredly the 'focken ideas they're packin', Mister Barnes. How could I fail to see the embedded menace?"

We were all watching, listening, waiting, because with Coldwell there always followed a comeback. But not that time. He scanned our faces.

"Nix the death duel. Atrocious idea. Melodramatic and inappropriate. Fair enough?"

"But what?" Charlie said.

"Will someone offer an alternative premise, please?"

"Big Thump's the writer," Spade said.

"Recoverin' writer," I said, dropping into hick. "Aint touched pen nor keyboard since they gradumated me."

"Recoverin' don't change how ya think," Charlie said. "A drunk always tastes drink, no matter how long since he's had one."

Coldwell's wily glance said he'd caught the confession in Charlie's comment, but his eyes seemed far away again.

"Let the PR people do their job," Lance said. "We rodeo. They write."

"But you model," Spade said. "And sing. Sort of."

"You'd rather I hide my God-given talent?" Lance said.

"He'd druther you lent him yore agent," Charlie said, "so he could get famous for somethin' outside the arena."

"Don't need his *stinking* agent," Spade said. "Do I Coldwell?"

Coldwell had lapsed into his vision-seeking trance.

"Coldwell?" Spade said low. He said it the way you'd try to wake somebody who slept with his hand on a pistol under his pillow.

"Justin?" Spade said real easy. Tedso tapped Coldwell. The little man seemed stoned, his

boyish blue eyes shiny as sheet ice. He took out his tape recorder.

“It’s the *focken* ideas they’re packin’,” he told it. He floated his glazed blue eyes onto Charlie. When he spoke, it was as if he’d come back from some faraway place. He talked in the tone of a man who’d seen terrible things and knew that they’d only haunt him if he spoke, but he could not bear the weight of silence.

“The gods have yielded me a new premise for your contest. Please hear me. You are the *consummate* rodeo artist, Mister Barnes. Your life is your art. In your clinics, in your arena, at your table, you teach not only the art of steer wrestling but also the art of rodeoing, which is — to all of you — inseparable from the rare art of living. Almost wordlessly, you teach the art of living rodeo.”

Coldwell looked to Spade, Lance, and me, his hand out now and gliding over us like a kid’s hand riding wind outside an open car window. All our bullshit detectors twitched on high alert.

“The ultimate goal is to consummate, is it not? You are all driven to consummate your abilities, as in to bring to perfection, to fruition. You, Lance, you consummated your wedding vows by making love to Shannon.”

“Gonna have the shitty diapers to prove it, too,” Spade said.

Coldwell ignored Spade and talked on, still as if in a trance.

“All of us seek consummation in one or another venue, the achievement of our ultimate goal.”

“Like films that make skulls weep,” Spade teased. Coldwell looked to him and then through him. At the time I still thought Spade represented nothing more to Coldwell than the cold hard pane that framed the fragile and flawed masterpiece he’d deceived himself into thinking he’d found in Mercedes, the impenetrable pane that kept her, like prison glass, visible but forever beyond reach.

“Yes,” Coldwell said, somber as a tax man come to collect, “so prophetic and profound that skulls will weep. Yes. Indeed, yes.” But the distance in his eyes, his voice, and the love-

hungry tenderness in his tone said he wasn't answering Spade at all, but Mercedes, as if she'd whispered, "Will you love me, Justin?"

"Yes," he said again.

The way he answered, the pure Longing in it that didn't match what Spade had asked, tickled the air like the crackle of lightning.

"Answers mean more when folks know the question," Charlie said. He'd sat upright on the mattress by then and dangled his sock feet over the edge. His red face seemed older and more grizzled in the low light, or maybe it was only that I was seeing him that way, though I still couldn't think him old. I hurt for Charlie, really hurt, likely more than he did. And earlier while the others talked steers I'd thought a good bit of Granddaddy Hendrix, of how he'd rodeoed until rodeo quit him and then — then? — I didn't know. He'd been past sixty when he'd come to die. Rodeo had likely quit him two decades or more before. Who had he been for those twenty years? Where had he hauled? Why? How had he lived? And why had I never wondered before that YouTube attack on Charlie, who told the yea-saying Coldwell, "Answers mean the most when folks know the question."

Directly Coldwell sobered from his trance, peering at us with dazed blue eyes then facing the paneled wall that divided the horses' quarters from ours, where our coats and lids hung on fake brass pegs.

"The question," he said to nobody in particular, "is one of conflict. If not the dangerous duel, then from what dramatic conflict may you, our producers, our viewers, and I most profit without feeling compromised? What would broaden the appeal beyond the arena?"

He needn't say it was the question he'd already just answered inside his own frantic mind. And so — still talking as if in a trance — he pitched his revised and always under revision Reality TV concept which was, to my thinking, totally hokey. He laid his illogic over us easy as a butterfly net.

The answer, he told us, was a love story.

"What happened to rodeo?" Charlie said.

“Nothing,” Coldwell said as if he believed it. “Rodeo remains the essence. I’m merely proposing a contemporary spin.”

The spun plot would go like this: Since Charlie was a figurative father to us all, Coldwell said, the story would begin with daughter Lucy empty-nesting Charlie for grad school. Enter Mercedes as his new daughter, innocent and virginal, a Cinderella-type wannabe barrel racer who’d been too poor to own a horse. Why would Charlie adopt her? Because he’d be lonely and vulnerable after Lucy left. And Mercedes was, after all, an orphan in need of love, was she not?

“No living kin,” Spade said, he the true bastard child of the West.

“That she claims,” I said.

“The latter suffices,” Coldwell said, his distant eyes caressing her wherever she lounged in his haunted mind. “The ideal family is one of our own choosing, is it not?”

I wondered, as surely everybody else did, who chose Coldwell, who claimed him as family. He’d mentioned no blood kin, not even for the holidays. I almost asked, but he hustled on with the plot as if to prevent such questions from any of us. As foolheartedly as he’d blinded himself to the puppy mill, meth lab, and oil tanks framing Charlie’s “West,” Coldwell seemed blinder yet to the remote possibility that the upteen-thousand people who’d hit YouTube might question all the role switching. How could a man that educated and bright deceive himself?

“Not to offend anybody,” I said, glancing at Spade, “but between YouTube and neon lights, aint Mercedes already a little too recognized for folks to take her as she’s cast?”

“Her virginity needn’t be *physical*,” Coldwell said. He said it as if he’d already answered it. “*Emotional* virginity will suffice for viewers. If her ‘secret’ is discovered, we’ll simply write it in.”

“Sweet,” Spade said. “Just write the truth as we go.”

“In art as in life,” Coldwell said. “Perhaps viewers will find Mercedes even more poignant if her secret past becomes exposed. They might embrace her shame and celebrate her triumph as when the innocent waif sold into prostitution at last finds a man who loves the beauty of her soul.”

He'd masked his own heroic role in that imaginary little drama about as well as an ostrich hides its butt. Spade elbowed me. Charlie worked his chew the way he did when swallowing a laugh.

"Lucky she found *me*," Spade said. "But who'd sell his wife into whoredom?"

"Waif," Coldwell said. "Waif. Orphaned, unclaimed child."

"Wife, waif," Spade said. "Same dudess." He flashed his phone pic for us all to see, a downloaded glamour shot of Mercedes from the modeling portfolio Coldwell had bankrolled. "Either way, I sure enough love that girl."

He said it like he meant it. And maybe he did. I haven't decided. While Coldwell's Longing seemed clear as a desert sky, I always suspected that Spade felt for Mercedes what a stud feels for his mares. I wasn't sure that he could love *anybody* until, as Charlie allowed, he "patched the hole in his soul." But I knew that whatever he wanted from and for her was more than sex. Rare beauty she was, he'd never have been lonely without her. Spade could peel beautiful women out of their panties faster than a gynecologist. I'd seen it.

So it wasn't *just* sex. No, he and Mercedes were broken in ways that complemented one another, like two one-legged orphans on parade, Spade missing his right leg, Mercedes missing her left, and they limped along leaning on one another in life's Grand Entry, bonded by misfortune but never quite in step or whole. Coldwell gathered himself for another blast.

"I feel compelled to reiterate that reality programming creates the *illusion* of reality," he said. "An audience cares little for the literal beyond its basis for the illusion. The magician knows his fans are impressed by neither hat nor rabbit. Rather, they are awed merely by the illusion of the conspiracy of rabbit, hat, magician, and audience. Does that analogy clarify?"

"En engles, por favor," Charlie said. His Okie drawl made the Spanish comic, but no more so than usual. Coldwell's expression said he sensed that Charlie was teasing. He spoke loudly and slowly as if to a deaf man.

"It's all en-ter-tain-ment," Coldwell said, his hands moving like a symphony conductor's. Charlie grinned and reached for the Diet Coke spittoon.

“Now that makes sense,” he said, spitting. “Try that more often.”

“Very well,” Coldwell said. “Today’s viewers deceive themselves into thinking they’ve neither time for, nor interest in, fiction. They drink the dramatic brew of raw human truth: the more immediate, the more engaging. Think of nonstop news, the sheer number of channels broadcasting it. In our harried workaholic lives, we feel guilty unless we are working.”

“So I’ve heard,” Charlie said. He yawned.

“Poor bastards,” Spade said. Coldwell rattled on.

“Consuming art is considered ‘play,’ whereas absorbing news makes viewers perceive themselves more informed and responsible citizens. By connection, then, witnessing real human behavior — even in highly *dramatized* situations — is perceived by viewers as being akin to enrolling in a Psychology of Human Behavior Seminar, an act to improve oneself. Of course it is nothing of the sort. It is, rather, viewers feeding themselves a fiction about *themselves* of which they are guiltily aware but which they dare not confess. Their personal fictions provide them either identity with or superiority to the TV characters. Follow?”

He didn’t seem to expect an answer.

“Good. It is precisely the *awareness* of their roles that prevents them from protesting the fictions they pretend to accept as real. To reject the ‘real’ of Reality TV would be to reject the ‘real’ of their rationalized reason for consuming. It isn’t complicated, truly.”

I wasn’t cruel enough to ask where he painted himself onto that canvas, but nobody in the rig could doubt that he’d painted himself into the fiction of having Mercedes.

If Mercedes became Charlie’s daughter, Coldwell explained, then Spade the bastard child would have to be recast. He definitely couldn’t be in the truck yet. No sir, Charlie couldn’t even know him --- though he could know *of* him. Spade would have to be recast as Outsider, the Dangerous Stranger Come Lately to seek the Beautiful Princess’s manicured rein hand. Charlie, rodeo royalty, would be obligated to think Spade beneath the Barnes blood, so to speak, and to win Mercedes the upstart Spade would challenge Charlie to the rodeo contest from The Buildings through Cheyenne.

“Why would I --- the *I* of yore tale --- agree to match a guy like you’ve cast Spade?” Charlie said. Coldwell studied him.

“Pride,” Coldwell said. “For a man of your character, to refuse the challenge is to concede.”

“A man of my character?” Charlie said.

“I witnessed it,” Coldwell said. “In your own café you drew your wallet and issued the challenge to Spade, did you not?”

Charlie thought back, nodded, and told Coldwell to go on, which Coldwell did as if he’d never doubted Charlie’s agreement. If Spade won, Coldwell said, Charlie would bless the union. If Charlie won, Spade would ride off into the clichéd sunset, heartbroken, with the equally heartbroken Mercedes remaining under Daddy’s dominion.

“Can you imagine the lovers’ parting?” Coldwell said. He was giddy with the promise of scripting Spade out of Mercedes’ life. “Can you *imagine* the American angst? We’ll have created the new *Romeo and Juliet*, the postmodern *Love Story*. Our project has the potential, gentlemen, to become the first true interactive, cinematic event of the fledgling century.”

“Aint gonna happen,” Spade said. He tossed a pillow at Charlie. “No way I lose. Don’t look so sad, King Gramps,” he teased. “Me and the little Missus’ll bring the babies to visit every other Christmas. Line up their strollers right beside Lance’s kids.”

“Don’t be threatenin’ me with tricycle terrorists,” Charlie said. “B’sides, there’s still the danger of incest.”

“We’ve recast Spade as the stranger,” Coldwell said. “No sibling connections.”

“Who’s talkin’ ‘bout Spade?” Charlie said. To taunt Spade, he winked and rubbed his crotch. “The TV shit is just actin’. Yore hip-locked fire-pole buckle bunny aint no *real* blood of mine.”

Spade scoffed and shook his head, as if trapped in a game he didn’t want to play but thought he needed to. And — whatever Mercedes meant to him — I always suspected that Charlie meant more. At least that was how I saw things then. Coldwell assured us there’d be

subplots aplenty to feature us all, especially one for me and Lucy.

“So,” he said, “gentlemen, what thinketh ye? May I proceed with the premise? Mercedes as the prize?”

Charlie took out his Cope can and went through his thinking ritual, packing the new dip and savoring it. We knew not to speak.

“Not to jinx us,” Charlie said, “cause I can use cash same as anybody. But if the Arena Gods is kind, won’t be a single scene of this ever get showed. Aint fit for blind folks to watch.”

“How ludicrous, Mister Barnes. That would render our efforts meaningless, would it not?”

Charlie slowly unscrewed the lid on his Diet Coke spittoon and heaved a wad of black juice into it. He looked hard at Coldwell.

“Don’t take no camera to make meanin’ for me,” he said. He glanced at me. “Long time ago, a man told me somethin’ that stuck. He said, ‘Yore reputation tells ya how to live when you think folks is watchin’. Yore character tells ya how to live when you think nobody will ever know.’ I don’t need nobody watchin’ my every move to give meaning to my life.”

Coldwell took up his pocket recorder and asked would Charlie repeat. Charlie did, changing the words little enough he seemed to be telling truth, looking mostly at me as he did.

“Yore granddaddy Lash,” he said when Coldwell clicked off the recorder. “He caught me siphonin’ gas from a U-Haul van at a rest stop while the guy inside slept. Was at a dark little roadside dive outside Lafayette, Loozeeeana, long time ago. Lash slipped up behind and cocked that Ruger revolver he kept in the glove box. He laughed hisself sick when I heard the click. Me, I never stole after that. Wasn’t the gun, either.”

True or not, Charlie’s little speech again mailed me back in time. Once more I heard Granddaddy saying, “Them what expect nothin’ is seldom disappointed.” What had he meant? That a man ought never hope for anything? Or that the man who dared not hope would get nothing? Was there a difference? I’d never felt sad about his death. I was sadder seeing him suffer. Though he’d barely passed sixty, to my boyhood self he’d seemed ancient. I was sadder

yet that I hadn't got to know how he'd lived. For years I'd imagined myself rodeoing with him. But lately I'd become more interested in those lonely years after rodeo quit him. On the rare times I asked, Charlie said just enough to tell me he'd rather not. Christmas was close now, only a couple weeks after the NFR. Charlie Barnes be damned, I meant to go home. Maybe if I worded my questions just right, Daddy would talk truth about Lash.

"So," Coldwell was saying, "can we all live with the premise as proposed?"

"Think we might ought to ask the prize?" Spade said. He tapped his phone.

"Dare she deny?" Coldwell said. He seemed as hurt as surprised, as if he'd rescripted our lives for her alone.

"Just one thing," Charlie said. He kept us waiting. Coldwell had learned patience during Charlie's long baited silences.

"Not makin' light of yore thinkin', Coldwell, but could there be such thing as an idea too dumb for TV?"

Coldwell smiled.

"For Reality TV?" he said. He laughed, then laughed louder, his mad teary-eyed laughter bordering on hysteria. As if we didn't know what else to do, we all laughed, even Tedso, watching the little man with a blend of pity and fear. Coldwell's laughter coasted to a crazy titter.

"In Utopia," Coldwell said, wiping at tears. "Not in America."

"All right then," Charlie said, "we got to agree on one more thing."

"Money? Coldwell guessed. Likely we all did. But Charlie shook his head no.

"Given yore temperament," Charlie drawled, "I don't 'xpect this'll be a deal breaker. Thing is, there's times it's best not to re-tell every side of every truth that tells itself."

"You'd advocate lying?" Coldwell said. Already his mind, like ours, wondered what Charlie was not saying.

"Nope," Charlie said. "Just mean that sometimes it's best when we learn a truth just to let it be. Findin' it's one thing. Tellin' it's another."

"What if —?" Coldwell stopped himself.

“Aint no matter,” Charlie said. “All that matter’s is that we agree. If I say somethin’ don’t go in yore show, it don’t go.”

“You’d handcuff my story line?” Coldwell said.

“Won’t lose the key,” Charlie said. “No more YouBoob kinda surprises. Deal?”

Coldwell kept his face calm, but inside he had to be all spasms.

“It’s your show, too,” he said.

“The show aint the problem,” Charlie said. “It’s my *life* I’m talkin’ ‘bout. At least one of us still knows the diff’rence.”

“Very well,” Coldwell said. He tried to be chipper.

“nother thing,” Charlie said. “Close related.”

He waited to be sure we were listing.

“I don’t play nobody but me. If I ain’t interestin’ enough as I am, then go find somebody who is.”

“And if you evolve by your own volition?” His eyes met Charlie’s stare.

“If you change on your own?” he translated.

“Do with that as you will,” Charlie drawled.

“Very well,” Coldwell said. And he said it in a way that made me wonder what his will would do.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Coldwell's lofty ambitions led to the same place mine had: Charlie's barn loft. He meant to, in Charlie's words, "estrogencize a room" for Mercedes. That was the one part of his Extreme Arena Makeover, which he naturally meant to document on film as "The Making of the Just-Enough Club." The second part was to convert Charlie's arena café into a stage set rodeo bar and grill called, I kid you not, The Just-Enough Club. He allowed he needed to layer our title with multiple meanings.

"Every set requires establishing locale," he said, "and so it is with mindset. To ground our viewers psychologically in the abstract concept, we shall proffer a specific physical setting."

We were in the café, the cold plank floor creaking. Dust stirred by our steps mixed with our cold breath, and our spurs chirped with each hollow thud of our boots on the planks in the closed-up cafe. In that distant way of his, Coldwell seemed to be seeing not what was there, but what would be. His vision, we'd soon learn, included a band stand, bar, and heads on the wall.

"Think of *Cheers* gone Western," he said, animated as he pointed where things would go. He'd shucked his cowboy costume for a director's beret and long black scarf over a pea coat.

"Plenty bars in town already done that," Charlie growled. "Why not use one of them?" We moved around the café, trying to imagine it redone, breath clouds fogging in the frozen air.

"They're so excessively loud," Coldwell said, "They're crowded, smoky, and charged with a propensity for sudden violence."

"Aint that what makes 'em bars?" Charlie said. I was trying to decide whether he was more bothered by the idea of booze in his barn or the possibility Coldwell expected him to pony up cash. Either way, he was sure enough roady from Vegas and the hard run both ways. We all were.

"For the masses," Coldwell said, "yes,"

"But not in yore Reality?"

"Precisely. Not in *our* Reality."

Charlie walked to the window to pack a fresh Cope and do his thinking. Outside the lone

wide window, small snowflakes swirled across the rigs parked between us and Charlie's house, where the lights shone soft in the early darkness and where Elena likely hustled over her oven. I was hungry for her cooking. Charlie walked back to Coldwell but looked about the café as he talked.

"Providin' it's on yore nickel," he drawled, "ya can have yore stage. Ya can tack up beer signs and mirrors. Nail all the horns ya like on the walls, so long as ya don't kill any of my stock to get em. But — hear me plain — no booze."

"My word," Coldwell said. Charlie peered at him like a pawn shop jeweler eyeing a hot diamond watch.

"Whatcha gonna do for a band?" Charlie said. Coldwell turned to Spade, who'd been brooding every since he learned that Coldwell had phoned Mercedes without asking. We'd all heard Spade strum his guitar, badly. He had a singing voice made for calling cattle to feed, alone.

"I told him I pick a little," Spade said, looking at Charlie. "I even wrote a few songs."

"Figures," Charlie said. "Maybe you'll write an ode to Rodeo b'fore TV focks it all up."

Charlie clamped a hand on my shoulder.

"Ya say you carpentered, Big Thump?"

"No, sir," I said. "I said I day-worked some on a crew that threw up pole barns and garages. My job was settin' poles and carryin' sheet metal."

"Close enough," Charlie said. "Just make damn shore I still got a barn when this *Reality* ends."

So the next morning after chores, with Charlie's begrudged blessing, we set to work gathering materials on the cheap for the no-booze bar to be. It wasn't that Charlie or Coldwell couldn't have bought new lumber for that part of the project — it was just that they wouldn't. While Spade and I demolished a neighbor's old loafing shed for the lumber, Coldwell and Tedso flitted off to Tulsa to meet Mercedes and pick out building materials and furnishings for her arena apartment. Spade flat-out seethed as we ripped down the neighbor's old shed on the prairie in the cold.

“Damn funny that Baby Blue can hustle cash for everythin’ but payroll,” Spade said.

“What say we trail *him* nonstop with a camera for a month?”

He swiped snot off his upper lip with the tattered sleeve of his coveralls. A vicious norther reddened our faces and bit our fingertips, drawing streams from our eyes and noses. A fine blowing snow dusted everything just enough to make us even colder. We’d left our lids at the barn in favor of stocking caps to fight frostbite. But Spade’s real fight, as always, was with his head, both of them. Despite his swagger, he felt half-neutered out there while Coldwell squired Mercedes around Tulsa.

“What ticks me is how he talks to her, Big Thump. You ever hear how he talks to her?”

“Like a real person?” I said. “One with a brain and a heart?”

I wished I hadn’t said it, but since Spade seldom thought more than dick deep, it cheered him. He rammèd a pry bar between two studs and ripped the silver-tipped nails free with a sorrowful creak. He snatched a dangling timber free and rammèd it in the truck bed. The violence was likely good for him.

“Ya know,” he said, wiping snot, “as far as back-stabbin’, self-promotin’ pricks go, you’re a pretty decent guy.”

By noon we’d pilfered all the good lumber as fast as we could and allowed we’d come back later to clean up the mess, which was the deal Charlie had made to get the shed. Yet I knew as we gassed our mounded load of lumber across the blowing skiffs of snow that we we’d not go back, ever, and I didn’t feel the shame I’d rightly ought to have felt. I was too frozen, tired, and hungry to care. Like a log being lapped at by a river on the rise, I was about to get swept into a swirling current I lacked the sense or means to flee. Right then, all I wanted was hot food.

“Lavantos sus manos!” Elena scolded us. She gestured toward Charlie’s bathroom for us to wash our cold-reddened hands, which stung as we thawed over the glowing wood stove. The house smelled of burning wood, rich foods, and, oddly, incense. For fear of another soul-saving lecture, I decided against asking Elena which holy day this was. And I decided not to ask about the dark splotches on Charlie’s sink, either, lest Elena think me critical of her housekeeping and

mount me on a mop handle. Spade saw the splotches, too.

“Shoe polish?” he whispered. I shrugged and started to wash.

Over the running water came the sound of Charlie’s boots on the hardwood kitchen floor, his spurs tinkling lightly. He appeared at the bathroom door still packing his brown jersey gloves in one hand and in the other his flop-eared red-and-black Scottish plaid cap that made him look like Elmer Fudd. Atop his broad head, where his grizzled mane had been, lay a cropped carpet of hair as purple as a ripe raspberry. Spade gawked. I gawked. Elena, who’d shadowed Charlie from the kitchen, squeezed her cheeks and screeched, “A dios!” Charlie shouldered between me and Spade and studied his dye job in the sink mirror.

“Spun a few miles off the ol’ odometer,” he said. He turned side to side.

“Anybody seen that besides us?” Spade said.

“Too dark?” Charlie said.

“Not for raspberry cobbler,” I said. “How long you leave that in?” I’d glanced at the labels on boxes of Momma’s hair dye, all of which said to rinse after five to fifteen minutes. Charlie shrugged.

“Since last night,” he said. “Got too good a scald to risk washin’ it out.”

“What’d it say on the box?” I said.

“Medium brown,” Charlie said.

“Time before rinsing?” I said. “You still got the box?” I hoped for an antidote, like on poison bottles that tell what to do if swallowed.

“I burnt it with the trash when I cleaned out my rig this mornin’.”

“You aim to let people see you that way?” Spade said.

“Well,” Charlie said, puffing his chest, “if a man aimed to keep a secret, he ought not hide it on his head in clear light, now had he? Hell, yes, I mean folks to see it.”

“Fame done got Mister Barnes,” Spade said. “Next it’ll be dental work.” He was looking straight at Charlie yet talking about him like he was somebody else, which, in a way, he was. The Charlie we thought we knew and loved had dyed. Elena inched toward Charlie, her hand rising

above her head until it plucked the raspberry.

“No es necesario, Señor Barnes,” she said. She stroked the ropey gray strands of her hair. “Silver is the color time chooses for itself.”

“And time looks damn fine wearin’ it,” Charlie said. “But a man looks goddamn old.”

He begged a hurried forgiveness when Elena spun away crossing herself. He wet a comb and raked the raspberry, tilting his head as he did.

“You heard from Coldwell?” Spade said. He’d checked his phone again for messages. Again, none. I’d stopped counting off the missives he’d fired Mercedes. Charlie’s mirror eyes caught the mad worry in Spade’s.

“She’ll give ya grief aplenty,” he said, “but not with him. Not yet, anyways.”

As if on cue, Sweet Child of Spade’s blared in. He hustled into the living room, behind the stove, where the blower’s noise granted him partial privacy. But the sharpness of his tone as he chewed her cut all the way to us.

“Hurt begets mad,” Charlie said low. “We men don’t much care to own hurt, but we’re easy with mad.”

“Think she’d play him?” I said. Spade had his back to his, punching holes in the air with his free hand as he talked.

“Askin’ for yoreself?” Charlie teased. “Or just professional curiosity, star to star?”

Joke aside, I wondered if he was actually hoping I would make a run at Mercedes. Such an act would trigger all the romantic fuses at once and clear the field of women, if it didn’t clear the place of everybody. He soaped and scrubbed his hands.

“I got more loyalty than that,” I said.

“To?” he said. He had to be snooping about me and Lucy.

“Just do,” I said. I handed him the towel.

Spade came back, suddenly happy.

“Best eat an extra biscuit,” he said. “My little honey bee wants her ‘partment hive re-lined.”

“People in hell wantin’ ice water,” Charlie said. “Don’t mean they get it. Tell her we got more to do than redecorate a perfectly fine ‘partment for a fire-pole prima donna.”

“Ought not judge,” Spade said. “It aint easy bein’ her.”

“Hell, Spade, it aint easy bein’ anybody,” Charlie said. “Some just hide it better.”

When we’d gathered round the table, Elena sat staring at Charlie, her hands folded, eyes scolding.

“I said I was sorry,” Charlie said. “Lo siento.”

“Tu alma es perdida,” Elena said. She meant he’d lost his soul.

“Aint lost,” Charlie said. “Just more colorful.”

He patted his raspberry and winked, but Elena wouldn’t have it. She’d only tolerate hard words so long as they didn’t damn the deities. So we hustled through lunch to a symphony of burning logs, clanging forks, and smacking lips, all of us anxious for relief. Spade’s Sweet Child rang in as Elena sliced the warm pecan pie. This time Spade took the call without leaving. He nodded eagerly and listened, flashing his bad-boy wolf teeth.

“My hammer’s *always* swingin’ for you,” he said, his happy self now. A cluster of “You bets” and “right, right,” led to a closing “Ditto,” which was how he ended public calls instead of telling Mercedes he loved her, too. Why he wouldn’t say publicly that he loved her, I don’t know. He pocketed his phone and allowed they were on the road from Tulsa, one truck loaded with remodeling supplies, the other with furniture. Pink furniture.

“Daddy’s little girl,” Charlie groaned. He scooted from the table and reached for his Cope, set on packing a fresh chew. Elena saw him.

“Primero la pastel!” she scolded. She’d practiced his precious pecan pie recipe until Charlie allowed it was just like his mamma’s. He eased his Cope can back into his pocket and slid his chair forward like a scolded kid. Elena squirted whipped cream and set the quarter-pie slices in front of us.

“If not for breakin’ Mercedes’ heart, I’d marry ya,” Spade told her. He swatted Elena’s bony hip when she set his plate before him.

“No casarse con El Diablo!” Elena said, backhanding Spade’s cheek. He tee-heeed it off. “Casarse con solamente El Salvador,” she said. She clutched the crucifix on the chain around her neck. “I wed only our Savior.”

After dessert, Charlie left for Tulsa to tend bank business and get the trailer bearings repacked. He was secret enough about something, though, that we suspected he might have a honey there or access to an off-shore back account. Spade and I drifted through light blowing snow to the arena, hoping the kerosene heater had warmed the café. I felt like humming “White Christmas.” Before lunch, we’d parked the beater truck loaded with lumber inside by the café door.

“Damn thing stayed tied,” Spade said. We put in Spade’s Slim Shady CD on loud and set to pulling nails from the used lumber with crowbars, careful to can the nails so they’d not cripple a horse or puncture a tire. I had barked a hand when the worn teeth of the bar slid off a spike and let the handle slam onto the tailgate. Blood seeped a darker shade of brown through my jersey gloves.

“The things we do for *love*,” I said. I had to talk away the throbbing. The heavy smell of burned kerosene made me about half sick, but the heat jettisoning from the burner felt welcome.

“Or tightasses,” Spade said. “You know, I heard of a place in Tulsa where they actually sell new boards with no nails in ‘em.”

“Speakin’ of nails,” I said, “we’d best get these to a dumpster before Charlie has us straightenin’ them to use over.”

“You ever think the camera would get to him like that?” Spade said. He pitched a cleaned two-by-six into the café. It thudded across the floor toward where we were supposed to build the stage.

“Not the camera,” I said. “It’s Coldwell’s YouTube trick.” We all still suspected that Coldwell had planted the message that got to Charlie.

“Know the surest cure for aging?” Spade said.

“Die young.”

“And leave such a pretty carcass the undertaker cries,” Spade said. “You ever think of dyin’, Big Thump?”

“Every time you drive. You?”

“Used to,” Spade said. “Used to all the time. Sometimes I’d be ridin’ wheat pastures or feedlot pens back in Texas. I’d feel somethin’ at my back, hot and heavy as July wind, no matter the season. Day or dark didn’t matter, neither. Always felt the same, like a hot, heavy puff of wind. I’d turn and look to see what it was, or who it was, and it was never anybody or anything. Never anything there but my shadow, and that only if the light was right. But I felt it, all the same. Wondered was I bonkers. It aint happened in a long time now.”

“What stopped it?” I said. I pitched another cleaned board into the café. It whacked the floor and slid toward the to-be stage. The heater hummed. Kerosene fumes floated out the open door.

“Charlie, I reckon. One spooky sort of fall day when I didn’t know he was here, Charlie spied me lookin’ over my shoulder a bunch. He came ridin’ calm out of the alleyway and eased his horse eased alongside the one I was working. ‘Gonna give yoreself a whiplash.’ he said. ‘Likely be best if ya told me what haints you dragged into my barn.’ You know the tone he gets. I wanted so bad to lie, but for a long time I’d wanted to tell somebody. So I told him. I told how hot and heavy it was when it touched me. And he allows, ‘Mine was cold and wet, heavy as a drenched saddle blanket when it hit me. Woke me up sometimes.’”

Spade strained to yank a spike from a four-by-four beam. It fought his pull with a long, eerie creak as it let go. And as spooky tales are prone to do, his tale sent my mind scavenging for connections I’d rather not have made: the rooster that crowed at midnight; Elena’s predictions in the firelight; the day she’d pronounced Spade “maldito” when he like to killed Roman and himself.

“He was just tryin’ to settle you,” I said. “Likely made it all up.”

“What I thought, too,” Spade said. He touched the shiny six-penny nail he’d just pulled, first to his face, then to mine. It was hot from friction and still wearing the musty oak smell of

the four-by-four. Spade tossed it in the can, where it clinked onto the heap.

“It worked,” Spade said.

“*What* worked?” I said.

“What Charlie told me.” When I asked Spade if he ever meant to say what that was, he looked at me as if he thought he’d already explained, then as if he’d likely best not.

“You’ll think I’m sure enough nuts,” Spade said.

“As if,” I said. Spade shrugged then tugged at another spike with the pry bar, his face knotted.

“He told me to let it ride,” Spade said, watching the long, notched nail fight to hold wood as he drew the bar handle to him. “He said the feelin’ wasn’t anything but the past itself, already dead. And the past was only afraid of bein’ left behind. ‘Just let it ride.’ That’s all he said. That, and, ‘Stop lookin’ back. Only thing that can kill ya aint behind. It’s ahead.’”

“And that brought you comfort?”

“Don’t it you?”

I thought about Granddaddy Lash. I thought about Daddy. And then I thought about Spade, son of an unnamed whore and nameless men who’d grunted over her. What lay ahead for him was a public whipping by an aging legend with raspberry hair. If it didn’t kill him outright, it’d surely kill the part of him that most needed to live. What could I say?

“It’s a comfort,” I lied. “That it is.”

We’d just stripped the nails the last boards and stacked them inside the warmed café when the rental trucks rumbled to the arena doors. Tedso came in and rolled the doors open, then climbed back in the second truck. Coldwell, with Mercedes laughing closer beside him on the seat than proper, came gunning the first truck in. He backed to the base of the stairwell, close beside the old beater loaded with lumber, and stepped down. When Mercedes slid to the driver’s door, Coldwell turned and gripped her hand like a coachman as she stepped down, all trouble and temptation in boots, jeans, and a white quilted down jacket, her red ringlets bouncing bright as rubies. Spade slung his crowbar into the beater truck so hard it dented a wheel well, brushed past

Coldwell, snatched Mercedes, and kissed her as if he meant to swallow her tonsils. She locked onto him, arms around his neck, legs around his belt, more self-defense than affection.

“Beauty and the feast,” Coldwell quipped. He tried to sound witty, but it came out like last rites — his. Spade lowered Mercedes to the arena dirt, draped an arm over her shoulder, and squeezed until she winced.

“Hear that?” Spade said too loud to her. “Little Boy Blue knows your man craves ya.”

“His name’s Justin,” Mercedes said real plain. “You don’t have to be mean.”

“Come blow your horn,” Spade said to Coldwell. He kissed Mercedes again, grabbed a handful of her hind pocket, and spun her for Coldwell to see.

“Wittle Boy Blue, Come blow your horn. Wool’s in the bed — oh! Cows in the corn.”

He caught Mercedes’ arm and cinched it around his waist, locking her hand in his own just above his buckle. What godawful force, I asked myself, could explain why there had not been a murder? The answer, of course, was Longing — and not purely for Mercedes. They both wanted the fame they thought the other embodied. If either had longed solely for her, one of them would have been long dead.

Spade wanted Coldwell’s optimism for the immediate as desperately as Coldwell craved Spade’s swagger — and the girl it drew. It was as if in his every pore Coldwell bore the promise of battling death to a draw, of slaying death itself with his immortal optimism. He wielded a brand of power as subtle but certain as the shortened September sunlight that whispers to a sumac leaf, “Fade to red. Fade, so you can flame beautiful in your fall.” Coldwell, with his infinite ability to absorb insults, smiled coolly.

“I fully comprehend the dynamics of *all* our relationships,” he said. “Still and all, who’d dare fault a man for admiring God’s own beauty incarnate?”

“Right,” Spade said, his dark eyes cold as well stones above his set smile. “Admiration. I like that.”

“Very well,” Coldwell said. He nodded toward the trucks to be unloaded. “Shall we begin on our precious princess’s palace?”

We laid down our tools and set to packing everything that would fit up the narrow stairwell. Spade, Tedso, and I lugged the sheetrock and what furnishings would fit while Mercedes and Coldwell carried the paint, lamps, rolls of wallpaper, and other light things. We set everything in the cold breezeway and emptied out the apartment that adjoined the south bathroom. With the furniture gone, the hollow little room echoed our boot steps and voices as Mercedes and Coldwell glided about like ice skaters, hands trailing along walls, instructing us. Mercedes, her hot green eyes skipping as lightly as sun on water, babbled giddily about her “décor,” a word that she seemed to like the taste and feel of on her studded tongue. Coldwell shed some kind of light on her that brought out an even brighter bloom, and I knew it like to blinded Spade.

She wanted the floor painted in pink and white squares, she said, “like a checkerboard.” She wanted sheetrock to cover the old barn wood walls, which I thought way cooler for a cowboy show than the candy-striped pink-and-white paper she and Coldwell had picked. But I did admit silently that the pink striped paper better matched the gaudy furniture they’d hauled back. Coldwell had conjured her a poster bed to be covered cloud-deep in pink pillows and blankets. She waved a picture of how it’d looked on display. Trouble was, a few of the bed parts were so big they wouldn’t fit up the stairwell. We had to move the truck outside and hoist the pieces high into the breezeway through the hay door on ropes dallied to come-a-longs. Coldwell filmed Mercedes on the ground beside the truck, tittering and nibbling at her artificial nails as she watched. For the camera, she answered pathetic questions about her dream coming true that I’d thought him too intelligent to pose. Then again, Coldwell was, if nothing else, an actor. To his credit, I sensed then and still believe he despised the entire project more than even Charlie did. He, after all, saw himself directing and producing major films. For him, a Reality show must have equated with the casting couch.

Since Spade didn’t exist in the script yet, Coldwell was careful to film him at a distance or from the back. But mostly — as he meant to do in real life — he deleted Spade whenever he could. That editing slight sometimes resulted in ropes mysteriously pulling themselves or

furniture strangely floating in the snowy sky. There was something dream-like about the outdoor footage.

“The guy caint make a payroll nor buy us new lumber,” Spade grumbled, “but he buys Tulsa plumb out of pink.”

“I just wanna come visit you two after the wedding,” I said, “to see how your little honey lines your hive.”

“Wedding?” Spade said. I thought he might let go the rope that held the dangling canopy dangerously above Coldwell, who’d stepped directly beneath it as he filmed from twenty feet below.

“Aint that the plot?” I said. “You win, you get the virgin bride. Didn’t you tell Charlie you’d bring out the grandkids?”

“That’s just for show,” he said.

“It’s a *Reality* show,” I said. I hummed the wedding march.

Spade stood there holding the rope bare-handed and looking down at Coldwell, who could’ve been guillotined in half if Spade had pitched the rope. Spade, looking down, seemed to be thinking, which was out of character, scripted or not. The cold wind drove the fine snow sideways through the open door, freezing me to the edge of cussing while Spade pondered his predicament. Coldwell yelled up was everything all right. Spade’s face muscles tightened. Finally, his dark eyes glimmering, Spade winked at me and gave the the rope a mighty tug

“Charlie might could be harder to beat than I allowed,” Spade said. We dragged the bed canopy inside and rested it on the planks.

“You just disproved his entire theory,” I said. “You’re actually seein’ things *right* because of a girl.”

We drew in the canopy and closed the hay door to block the wind. But through the shrinking frame of that door hinging closed, Spade watched dapper little Coldwell in his black derby and purple scarf lower his camera and wrap an arm around the waist of Mercedes’ down jacket to usher her inside. I tied off the hay door then unhitched the lift ropes from the canopy

and hoisted my end. I needed to lighten Spade's mood.

"Grab onto your weddin' bed," I said.

Spade didn't answer. His hot, haunted eyes were still burning full of Coldwell squiring Mercedes.

"He's no threat," I said.

"I damn sure am," Spade said. "Lots of guys I might've killed if somebody hadn't dragged me off. That aint no act, Big Thump. But what really scalds my balls — she don't *have* to let him paw her like that."

He drove his right fist into a one-by-six barn board, splintering it, then kissed his bloody knuckles. The laid-open pine board freed its scent. Spade's eyes glazed, his veins swelling.

"Sometimes when I get this way I wish I could lock myself up," he seethed.

"All over after Cheyenne," I said. "You said you don't want to marry her, anyway. What's it matter if she goes with Coldwell? It'll be all over."

I felt a sudden terror from what I'd said. Though Coldwell's scheme had held Spade and Charlie together for a time, in the end it would kill all chance of healing. No matter who won, they'd likely never haul in the same rig again. Charlie had meant to ground him, anyway, and would've, I'd no doubt, if not for Coldwell's scheme. Even worse for me, one or both seemed doomed, as Charlie had warned me in Vegas, to blame me for a missed haze, which meant I wouldn't be able to haul with either of them. So we'd make one glorious run at the world for all the world to see, and then our little world would be no more. When I thought of people I'd lose, I didn't think at all of Coldwell, Mercedes, or even Lucy. No, I thought of Spade and Charlie and Lance, missing them already.

My thinking convinced me that I did, after all, belong in Charlie's arena and in his rig until such time as the Arena Gods took it upon their graces to pronounce otherwise. The best I could do was savor the now of it. Soon enough we'd be on the road to Denver. Soon enough we'd find rodeos I could actually enter, too, instead of just hazing. I might be too late to make a run at Rookie of the Year, but then again I just might not. If I could hit a major lick over Cowboy

Christmas, who knew? Even under siege from pink madness and bar facades, Charlie's place was where I belonged. We were headed to Denver and endless highways all leading toward Vegas. Rodeo was my friend, lover, and wife. I'd come to win the world. Finally I was beginning — barely, but beginning nonetheless — to know what that meant. And to know how little I'd learned of love and death.

Chapter Twenty-Five

In the bitter cold of late December when the long nights doubled each day's short light, Spade was gripped by some desire we hadn't known he owned. That desire drove him to ask Charlie for the two things Charlie most begrudged us: time and money. Yet I knew even as I watched that neither time nor money completely explained the mystery, or maybe I ought to say the *madness*, of what I witnessed. Coldwell, who filmed it all, shrieked that we'd witnessed a miracle. On his voiceover to that footage, he called it in his crazy breathless way of talking, "A mythical feat enacted by a mythical figure on a doomed quest for love!" Charlie called it "just plain nuts." Later, when I asked Coldwell how he found doom in Spade's "quest" for Mercedes, he leveled his boyish blue eyes at me as if surprised I'd asked.

"That wasn't for Mercedes," he said real calm. "That poor princess was merely the catalyst." His tone and expression said I ought not ask two dumb questions, so I didn't.

It started like most any wintry Oklahoma day at Charlie's. We were huddled on low stools warming our hands by the tack room wood stove, the happy little flames cheering Spade, I hoped. We'd finished the regular chores and come to gather his shoeing gear from the tack room before starting on about thirty overdue horses. I was plenty happy feeling the heat, listening to the fire, and breathing in the scent of honey locusts and oiled saddles. Sullen, oddly quiet, Spade had brooded all morning for reasons I'd not dared ask. Since coming back from Christmas, he'd seemed changed. At first I laid it on fatigue. We'd worked with little sleep and the threat of less.

We'd just got thawed good when Charlie and Coldwell came clattering in and took spots by the stove, Coldwell chattering about Charlie's upcoming clinic that had become an Oklahoma tradition. The sold-out three-day clinic ended with a New Year's Eve jackpot bulldogging that usually lasted all New Year's Day. Rigs were on the road now, barreling toward us, and we weren't ready. It would be hard to imagine a worse time for what Spade asked. While Coldwell panned their faces, Spade turned to Charlie and asked real soft and polite if he might could slip out early that afternoon for a quick Tulsa run to see his squeeze.

"Important," he said low. He turned from Charlie and stared into the fire. "Back by

breakfast,” he promised. But when he raised his dark, weary, hangdog, oddly sheepish eyes, Charlie draped an arm around his tattered denim coat’s shoulders and propped Spade up stiffly, grinning that gat-toothed tsk-tsk grin as if he’d completely missed Spade’s tone. I’ve replayed that footage, trying to climb inside their minds — and Coldwell’s.

“Leave?” Charlie said. Red-faced from cold in his Elmer Fudd hat, he grinned a hard, tight grin and looked from Spade to me to Spade. “Ya just got back, both of ya.”

Truth was, he hadn’t forgiven us for leaving him to chore and muck stalls while we actually took a Christmas holiday. I’d spent three days with my folks. Spade and Mercedes had made a speedy ski run to a Colorado condo that another stripper’s family owned. He’d come back as broke as a dropped chandelier and changed in ways I couldn’t name. I found myself thinking of newborn calves when they get their first taste of milk. Suddenly they crave something that they didn’t know existed ten minutes earlier. So they scramble to grab another teat as if their lives depended on it — because their lives do. That’s how Spade acted. He seemed suddenly hungry for something he’d just tasted. Though he never said as much, I gathered that it had to do with family. He’d rattled on about how happy they all were at Christmas, how the other stripper’s folks seemed fine with her life and with Mercedes’ and with his. He’d seemed touched that somebody cared enough to ask and to listen.

“Need time with her, Mister Barnes,” Spade said humbly. Tired though he was, he looked at Charlie dead-on. “Mean a good bit to me, Sir. Thing is, too, much as I don’t want to ask, I could use a little advance, if you can see your way.”

What the advance had to do with Mercedes, I never learned. Regardless, her calls all morning had carried a secret sense of urgency that Spade meant to keep that way, at least so far as it concerned money. Though we were due a thin cut from the school’s profit and any horses Charlie sold, minimum wage would’ve doubled our pay if we’d kept honest hours. And I knew that Spade had won squat in Vegas and had since spent his wages and any stash he’d saved. Money aside, Charlie’s main concern, and rightly so, was making Spade nail new plates on about thirty head of horses before the clinic started. Most were practice horses he meant to mount guys

on and then sell to them.

“Leave any time ya like,” Charlie drawled, “*after* the last horse trots to his stall on new plates. Ya’ll know the school starts tomorrow. Guys is on the road now.”

Spade stared at the floor and worked his mouth.

“I’ll get ‘em first thing tomorrow, Mister Barnes,” he said. “Be here early. It’d mean a good bit to me if I could go to her now.”

Charlie tried joking it away.

“Shape yore in Spade, after three strokes you’d puddle on the floor beside her bed like melted ice cream. Paramedics’ll find ya there. Coroner’s report’ll read, ‘Fornicaint, but thought he could.’”

Grinning that big gat-toothed grin, he slapped Spade on the back. “She’ll be there.”

“After the last horse,” Spade said. He seemed neither sad nor mad, just flat from fatigue and dogged by some force, be it god or demon, to get to Mercedes.

“Come again?” Charlie said.

“You said I can leave soon as the last horse wears new plates. That’ll be this evenin’. And I’ll need cash.”

“If yore tough enough or dumb enough,” Charlie said. He shook his head, his eyes bright, mocking. “If you got enough left in ya to nail yore gal after nailin’ on that many plates, you aint just a better man than I *am* — yore a better man than I ever *was*.”

“After the last horse,” Spade said.

Coldwell clicked off his camera and looked to be debating himself, but when Charlie stepped out, his spurs chirping on the plywood then muffled in the sand, Coldwell trailed him into the arena. Spade and I looked at each other, shrugged, and set to work. We loaded his shoeing gear in the old beater truck we’d brought inside and backed to the tack room steps. While I drove to alleyway between the stalls where we’d set shop, Spade brooded against the passenger door. His sulking quiet ground at me until I said I wished I’d learned to shoe so we could finish faster.

“The man don’t think I *can*,” he said. He said it not in anger, but in pain, as if it wasn’t Charlie’s denial of permission but his denial of Spade’s toughness that hurt. His dark eyes burned wet now, weary but hot, red lines streaking them. His stubble, like mine, hadn’t felt a blade in days, and the stink of old sweat rode in our stiff, dirty clothes and in our hair.

“He’ll be starin’ at the backs of his eyelids before the six o’clock news ends,” I said. “Just go. Hell, a good ten of these horses won’t feel a saddle this week. Shoe the ones we’ll use. Leave the others.”

“I *can*,” Spade said. “He don’t think it, but I damn well *can*.”

“You don’t *need* to,” I said. But, much as I ought not confess this, I was thinking of my own time, too. Lucy’d phoned that she meant to spend the afternoon the KC bluffs with her folks, Judge and Miss Rosa, then roll on down. If Spade slipped off early, so could I.

“I need to see her,” Spade said. “Not for wool. Somethin’ else, personal. She needs me there.”

“Hell,” I said. “Go now. There’s guys coming who can nail on shoes. He caint take away your birthday.”

Spade shook off the idea, lifted his crumpled lid, and scratched his oily black hair. He’d already lathered himself into such a sweat that steam rose.

“Now aint when I need go,” he said. “Tonight, after her job. It’s personal, is all.”

Though he wouldn’t say then nor ever what he meant by “Personal,” he’d told me that Mercedes was stripping again after being twice fired from regular jobs, once for tardiness and once for refusing sex with her boss.

“If she’d showed him to me,” Spade said, “I would’ve slit his sack.”

One hand gripped an imaginary scrotum and the other laid the dude’s nuts loose in two quick strokes. It didn’t seem the moment to remind Spade he’d have a lifetime to practice. Instead, I eased the old beater truck along, glad for the heater, and listened as he told me with an odd tonic of proud humility, hand over his heart, that he and Mercedes had vowed what I took to be a quirky kind of monogamy for a stripper. The only way Spade could tolerate her job was if

she vowed she'd not let another man touch her. That halved her income but let her keep a job. She danced for the house flat pay of \$100 nightly and precious few tips. Tips tucked in her g-string would've violated her vow, and as for lap dances, what's to say? Zilch. The place only kept her because she was, well, Mercedes, and her name flashing on the neon beside the interstate filled seats.

"Aint never knowed one like her," Spade said.

"Likely cause there aint another," I said. I'd intended it as a compliment.

"Don't be getting' jack batty over my squeeze," Spade said. I braked the truck in the alleyway and stared at him.

"Me?" I said. "The girls shakes her tits at three-hundred guys — "

My skull cracked the driver's window before I realized he'd hammered me. He pounced at me on the seat, his arm cocked, those haunted eyes daring me to move. My jaw throbbed, already swelling. He settled back in the seat when he saw I was more surprised than mad.

"You cheap-shotted me," I said. "Always figured we'd fight, Spade. Damn sure *never* figured you to cheap-shot me."

Crazy as this sounds, I started to laugh, a little *this-can't-be-real* giggle at first, then a rolling out-of-control laugh that only the sleepless know. I looked at our sorry carcasses and laughed at how the wild steers had ripped the pockets and belt loops off our shirts and jeans. I laughed at Mercedes' horse phobia and their warped fire pole brand of monogamy. I laughed at Elena's superstitions. I laughed at Charlie's coyote pranks to keep cheap labor. And I laughed that Spade — a man who'd bragged he'd rather rape a nanny goat than go to bed horny — would fight for the honor of a stripper. I laughed at the nutsiness of the whole damn deal. I laughed harder and harder and harder, convulsing with it, hammering my palms on the steering wheel and tasting the salt in my crazy laugh tears.

"What?" Spade said. He started to giggle. "Wha—at?"

Then he was laughing, too, slapping at his sides and at me. Each time we'd almost stop, one of us would mock Charlie's raspberry dye job or describe how little Coldwell had knelt with

Mercedes' red boots in his trembling hands and we'd roar with that crazy laughter again. Finally, long after anything had been fresh or funny, the madness spent itself. We sat quiet, wiping our streaked faces, not looking at each other and not even talking, almost embarrassed, as if we'd watched *Brokeback Mountain* together on a camper bed. Not until Spade's door latch clicked did I look.

"Didn't mean the cheap shot," he said. Breath clouds hung close to his dark, hollow face in the wide alleyway between stalls. "Take it back if I could."

"Better yet," I said, stepping out. "I'll give it back. In my own time."

By the time I'd caught and haltered the first two horses, Spade had his heavy leather shoeing apron strapped on and the propane forge roaring. He studied the first horse's hooves then leaned inside the little truck's camper shell and rattled through the dozens of shiny steel shoes on his rack in search of the right size. I hitched the horses to a pipe rail, peeled off my gloves, and rubbed my hands close to the blue gas flame until he needed me to hold the first horse's head. But before he bent under the first horse, he went through what amounted to a little ritual I'd not seen. He gripped his hoof trimmers in one hand, his rasp and hammer in the other. He sucked in a big breath, puffed his chest, and lifted his face to the sky. As if talking to the Arena Gods themselves, he said in a holy tone, "I *can*, by God, I *can*."

Then he dove for a hoof. Trimmings flew, the rasp seesawed off the jagged edges, and the forge roared. Soon the whole barn pulsed in time to the ringing of Spade's hammer on the anvil, shaping cherry molten steel that hissed steam clouds when Spade plunged the shoes into the cooling bucket. Pure unstoppable motion, he trimmed and rasped and hammered and clinched and hollered, "Bring another one!" at a pace that ought to have killed him by the third horse. By the tenth horse, around one o'clock, he'd shucked his vest and shirt, running bare-chested from horse to forge to anvil and back to the horse, sweat beading in his matted black chest hair. The cold barn smelled of horse shit, propane, hot steel, and overriding it all, Spade's sweat. As the temp dropped steadily outside and cold air cocooned his sweated body, Spade worked shrouded in steam like a hot horse.

Around three, Charlie came once to check on us, Coldwell in tow. Charlie, looking worried, eased me aside. We left Coldwell holding the lead shank of the horse Spade was shoeing, which tickled him. He knew what he was seeing and locked his camera on it. Spade seemed not to notice. He glanced at Charlie but never lost rhythm, working as if he were the only one in the county, gesturing now for another horse instead of speaking, as if he needed to save all energy.

“What’d he swallow?” Charlie asked. Spade made no secret of his driving pills, but I knew he’d used them all and lacked the cash to refill.

“Love potion,” I said, “near as I can tell.” Spade was pounding red-hot steel, swinging the hammer as if he meant to split the anvil. “You gonna be the one to stop ‘im?”

Charlie touched the purple knot on my jaw from where Spade had tagged me. I winced when he pressed it.

“You ladies got to learn to play nice,” he said. “Be at the house if ya need me. Calls to make.”

Calls claimed most of Charlie’s time, anyway. Big Guns wanted to know if he’d have seats for them on Scooter at Denver. Regular Guys called about the clinic, horses for sale, or horses they wanted trained. Charlie always had calls to take or make. But just as he turned to go, Spade stumbled and slammed into his forge, the blue flame whooshing at his ribs. Charlie lunged, snatched Spade’s arm, and held tight when Spade tried to rip it free.

“Leave a few for t’morrow,” Charlie said. “Go to her, she means that much.” Spade seemed to be balancing Charlie’s grip and tone against what gas he had left in his tired tank. Coldwell scurried to get their faces on camera. Spade set his mouth to say something, but didn’t. He just nodded that he understood.

“Shoe the ones we’ll need first,” Charlie said. Then he repeated, “If she means that much.”

Spade looked deep into Charlie’s big broad red face, a face ever redder near the forge, and strained to say what he could not make himself say because somewhere, maybe in the Texas

brothel where he was weaned, he'd learned not to ask for too much.

"Aint about her," he mumbled.

"Then what the hell's it *about*?"

"I *can*," Spade said. Charlie, likely because he never saw himself as Spade saw him, also did not hear Spade as Spade meant him to.

"*Can* don't mean *got to*," he said. "Horse *can* run hard enough at a tree to break his neck. Don't mean he ought to."

"You'll see," Spade said. Charlie, still sniffing for Vitamin Speed, didn't answer. He just patted Spade's shoulder, nodded, and left, vanishing into the tall shadows cast on the stall walls by the light of the forge. Spade, his breathing slowed, steam cloud thinning, watched Charlie leave, then whirled and set to it again. Shortly he called for another horse, then another. The first little band of guys who'd come early for Charlie's clinic began to gather up at the far end of the shadowy alleyway between the stalls, close enough to see yet far enough not to intrude. Their breath rising in the cold, they watched shirtless Spade shoe two more in a fury, shook their heads, waved to me, and traipsed away, the myth of Spade now theirs to tell. Over the forge's roar and the hammer's clang, Coldwell yelled questions about food and sleep and work that I allowed he already knew the answers to, but wanted the answers filmed.

Spade, tiring but barely slowing, sped from forge to anvil to horse. But he moved now with his back bent, as if the weight of the cold air was too great for him to straighten his spine. The long layer of his rippled muscles began involuntary twitches that become sleep-shattering convulsions as if the body has become addicted to motion. This I knew from years heaving hay bales. Coldwell kept filming and chattering, excited, knowing he had his myth. If Spade's ears still worked, he didn't use them. That is, not until Coldwell spoke the name that so fatally linked them.

"Care to share your motive for hastening to Mercedes?"

At the bare mention of her name, Spade threw down the sorrel's hind hoof from the jack, straightened his spine for the first time in about eight horses, and snatched Coldwell's camera

before the backpedaling little guy located him in the lens.

“Personal,” Spade said.

Clutching the camera he’d snatched, he quivered in the cold, all heat, muscle, and steam, the steam wrapping around Coldwell’s hatless head like ghostly arms. Once more I wanted, if only for the lifespan of a house fly, to be inside both their minds and maybe even inside Mercedes’. I wanted to feel Coldwell’s tortured little-boy love for the girl who belonged to the man he hated, feared, needed, and sometimes seemed to love. I wanted to know what “Personal” business had Spade ripping down the self-preservation signs of his own body and mind. I wanted to know — as only a girl of Mercedes’ fatal charm could know — how it felt to own more power than any man. I did not want to *be* any of them. I only wanted to *know* what it would be like to be them. Though at the time I couldn’t have said why I wanted to know, I’ve since decided that somehow knowing what it was like to be them might somehow let me better at being me.

“Then shall we talk horses?” Coldwell said. His smile twitched fast as Spade’s muscles. Spade handed the camera back to Coldwell and looked to me, his dark eyes wild, his sweaty black hair frayed as the ends of a broken rope.

“How many?”

I’d tallied twenty-three with my pocket knife on the stall plank where I’d leaned as I held the horses. To pass time, I’d even carved the date and Spade’s name, sensing from the first horse that what was about to happen ought to be recorded.

“Seven to go,” I said. I tapped my watch, twenty past five. “Tomorrow.”

More guys who’d driven in early for Charlie’s school were milling toward us in the alleyway, kicking along at sawdust and drifting slowly closer as if they’d just happened by. Spade studied the new guys with a look that stopped them thirty feet from us, then nodded for me to bring another horse and bent back under the one he was trimming. Coldwell’s expression said he was fine steadying the gentle sorrel, so I left them to such peace as they’d made and went for more horses.

The last seven horses were stalled an alleyway over, which meant I had to walk around

the center row of stalls either through the crossover lane at the north end or else through the arena, past the tack room and café. I allowed the arena route would be cheerier because some cold nights such as that one, when the wind leaned hard on the barn walls, the rafters moaned out sad lonely notes that a man already punchy from days without sleep need not hear.

What I heard instead were voices in the arena, the first one familiar as the firmness of a favorite pillow. Lucy rounded the wall into the light, backpedaling as she talked to whoever trailed her. She was wearing her white quilted down jacket with a white headband around her dark loose hair and striped knit gloves that she slapped together to warm her hands. Topsy, her white-tipped tail wagging, saw me first and yapped, then charged over and climbed my leg. I rubbed her jaws between my hands as she growled. Lucy whirled, her green eyes playful but cautious, as if warning me of listening ears.

“The one Chance I’ll never take,” she joked. She laughed lightly, for those following, I knew. Then she really saw the red-eyed bundle of dirty rags that I was. “Good gawd!” she shrieked. “Has uncle Charlie torched your bed?”

Before I could answer, her unlikely entourage rounded the corner. First came Lucy’s momma, Miss Rosa, striding like a queen, her grand silver-framed face probing sky as if her skin had to deliver the world her blind eyes denied. She stepped carefully, feeling the sand’s subtle shift beneath her white riding boots. She wore a long pleated, white skirt, and a stiff white long wool coat with matching scarf. If not for her dark glasses, she could’ve hid in a bottle of White-Out. But what, I asked myself, did color matter to the blind? I took her bony gloved hand when she offered it.

“Good to see you again, Chance,” she said, her voice husky, her nose translating smell to sight. She laughed dryly at her joke. Charlie and Judge flanked her, moving slowly and heavily as if carrying some invisible weight that yoked them forever together. Judge seemed sober, dressed in fine brown boots, pressed slacks, a black Pendleton jacket and 15X silver Stetson that still bore the fine creases Charlie’s crumpled lid had surrendered a thousand runs ago. I was too surprised by Miss Rosa’s joke to think before I answered.

“Even if you *could* see,” I said, “you’d likely still smell me first.”

“*Honest* labor bears no stench,” she said, her frail, liver-spotted face tipped up. She’d stroked the word *honest* just enough to make it linger. Spade’s hammer rang against his anvil, sharp and fast as gunfire. Air currents carried us whiffs of propane and stalls needing mucked. The little crowd at the other end of the alleyway seemed too focused on Spade to notice us.

“Don’t pay enough to be dishonest,” I said. My words were so slurred they surely thought me drunk.

“More’n yore worth,” Charlie said. He said it automatically, then turned to somebody still out of sight and added, “He’s really one hell of a hand.”

The shape I was in, too beat to bear up much longer against gravity, my eyes had to convince my brain that I knew the startled faces I saw next, my own sweet misplaced folks. I glared at Lucy, silently accusing her of scheming the worst family gathering since the Montagues and Capulets. Her scowl told me — and time proved it true — that my folks’ presence surprised her as much as it did me. Hers, she’d invited. Mine had come as a surprise.

“We’d hoped to be *a welcome* surprise,” Momma said softly. She smiled, embarrassed, and maybe even hurt by the glare I’d shot Lucy. She gripped to her belly a big silver platter of Christmas leftovers covered in aluminum foil. She’d built her baby boy a care package, and my accusing glare at Lucy was the saintly woman’s thanks. The platter tipped in her hands, brown gravy trickling past the creased aluminum foil and plopping like tears in the arena dust.

“Miss Barnes told us you have a microwave,” Momma said. She smiled, too proud to show hurt in front of strangers.

“Call me Lucy, please,” Lucy said.

“When?” I said, still blaming Lucy.

“When we arrived,” Momma answered. She spoke deliberately, substituting *arrived* for her natural *got here*, pronouncing every syllable as if she felt herself being judged by rich folks. I was ticked she felt self-conscious. I was ticked they’d come at such a time. And I was more ticked by something intangible in her manner, a subtle insinuation that she’d interrupted a

holiday gathering of me with my “other family” as if I’d chosen them over her. By rights, she ought not have suspected anything at all between Lucy and me. So far as I could recall, I’d never mentioned Lucy. But mommas sense the tone of a line like the one Lucy’d said to me — “The one Chance I never take” — and she likely sensed, rightly, that her baby boy hadn’t lived entirely without feminine attention since my breakup with the sweet little rich girl I’d brought home to meet them. As the thinking of a mother tends to run, Lucy’s folks became potential in-laws and competition that she and Daddy, in their crisp holiday jeans and denim jackets couldn’t match. At least that’s how I saw her thinking. Daddy looked at Lucy and winked at me as if to say I’d done good to find her. If I could’ve found a hole deep enough, I’d have climbed in it and pulled it shut after me.

“More horses!” Spade howled. It was a pained, foot-in-the-trap howl. Suddenly I dreaded that Spade might collapse if he lacked a horse to lean on. I turned to Lucy, dreading how my folks might wrongly think us paired-up by the favor I was about to ask. But I was too tired to think of options. Might she, please, I asked her, show Momma and Daddy to my room before the food spoiled. I asked that they forgive my room.

“Likely sand on the sheets,” I said. “You raised me better.”

“You look famished,” Momma said. *Famished*, for the rich in-laws. She tried to hide her disgust at my smell.

“Used to it,” I said. “I clean up real good, I promise.”

I hugged them and thanked them and promised through a hysterical laugh to sit-down with them the instant the ambulance took Spade. Then I spun to hustle more horses. But first, and as my thinking spanned that dangerous chasm between guessing and knowing, I sensed that Charlie had surely explained Spade’s madness — the furious clanging of hammer to forge — enough to let me step into the tale where they found me. My wild eyes asked them to prove my thinking right.

“You’ll see,” I told them, darting past. Lucy, out of kindness to my puzzled folks, ushered them away, Topsy prancing behind.

By the time I led the next two horses to him, Spade, still bare-chested and bare-headed in a cloud of his own steam, was clinching the last nail of the horse he'd just finished. A full mob now watched in slack-jawed awe, as if they knew not what they saw but knew it would something to tell.

“Seven to go,” I said.

I said it loud enough for the crowd, as if I'd introduced God. Miss Rosa, Judge, and Charlie were talking with Coldwell, who'd laid his camera on the tailgate of the truck, recklessly close to the forge. Coldwell, all teeth and praise and chatter, seemed to inhale the wealth that swelled every cell of Miss Rosa's and Judge's failing bodies. Judge, though cordial as the campaigning judge he'd been, eyed Coldwell like the owner of a show poodle in heat eyes a cur dog tunneling under his chain link. I thought he'd spit when Coldwell snatched his hand.

“What a delight to meet another of the rugged rodeo Barnes family,” Coldwell said.

“Rodeo is my brother's domain,” Judge snarled. “I followed the legal trail.”

I knew through Lucy that the legal trail he'd chosen sparked a twenty-year lawsuit to settle ownership of their home place. Six sections of land, almost four-thousand acres, originally under the Rafter B Slash brand got parceled off acre by acre to cover legal fees, mostly paid to the firm where Judge was then a junior partner. When only the twenty acres remained with the house where Charlie and Judge had bloodied one another's faces as boys, Judge settled. That'd been five years ago, shortly before Charlie ran off his fourth wife with the No-Estragin sign. I'd heard the epic from Lucy.

“Least I held the place together,” Charlie told her as they left the Oklahoma City courthouse. Lucy, no surprise, had sided with Charlie. That lawsuit was but one of infinite reasons I'd thought Garth Brooks a more probable visitor than Miss Rosa and Judge. Why oh why, I asked my tired brain, had Lucy gathered them? Coldwell, as practiced at shedding rejection as a Bible salesman in hell, gripped hands and gushed to her folks that he'd longed — for a short man, he was sure enough long on *Longing* — to meet “the genetic headwaters of such a magnificent spawn as Lucinda Rose.”

“Poor metaphor,” Miss Rosa quipped. “There’s something fishy about it.”

Her papery lips lay flat and hard as the top of Spade’s anvil, but I allowed that her blind eyes, if we could’ve seen them, were laughing. But the why of it, why Lucy’s folks had even come to Charlie’s, much less why Miss Rosa in her elegance entered that long-roofed dust bowl, I could not not not get a handle on.

Coldwell went back to filming, talking low to his camera and panning the mob as well the stagger that had driven the swagger from Spade. As more rigs rolled in for the school, the tale of Spade’s quest whispered itself ear to ear until the alleyway filled with awed faces of whole families. Meanwhile Lucy brought my folks back and led Momma to Miss Rosa, the three of them chit-chatting off to the side like matrons of some sale barn society-page. I was holding a glass-eyed overo horse named Speck who fidgeted unless we twitched him. So I slid the little nylon noose around Speck’s spiteful speckled nose and twisted the short wooden handle until the tightening rope’s pressure on his lip got him to thinking more about the pressure than about his hooves. Spade, too reckless to realize the danger, worked right through my little tussle, snatching Speck’s right fore hoof and locking it in the vise of his trembling but unsundering knees. Daddy walked to me and peered at Spade, shirtless in the cold, now all atwilt and aglow with sweat in the roaring blue flame of the forge.

“He come up much for air?” Daddy asked low.

“In about an hour,” I said. “Three to go.” Speck set to thrashing, lifting on me, threatening to paw Spade.

“If he lives?” Daddy said. He hadn’t formed an opinion on which option might be best.

“If he don’t,” I said, “the air won’t matter.” I reeled Speck’s head down and twisted the twitch until Speck decided he liked hoof work more than he liked pain. When Spade clinched the last nail in Speck’s last hoof, he straightened and braced himself against Speck’s shoulder. In the scorching blue light of the forge, his drenched muscles danced in full spasm now, leaping like the dying reflexes of a butchered beef, the last of its life heat rising in steam as skinning knives lay the hide aside. That’s how his muscles twitched. His ribs heaved. If he’d collapsed right then,

or if he just grabbed his clothes and wobbled away, his myth was made: twenty-six horses since morning, and that after brutal sleepless days of work enough for ten men.

He raised his head, his dark, streaked eyes roaming the mob and then, as he wobbled backward waiting for balance returned, searching the ceiling and walls until he found me. His legs quivering like a new colt's inside his drenched shoeing chaps, Spade braced himself, spat as if spitting blood instead of tobacco, and tapped his jaw. I asked Daddy to untie and bring the next horse over while I gathered Spade's Cope from the truck seat. The ten steps I could save the poor bastard might be the ten he'd need. He tiny-stepped gimpy as a foundered horse to the tailgate but knew not to sit for fear of muscles locking him in place. He just stood there, waist-up naked, raw and hot and wild as his forge. It was as if invisible strings of willpower held him limp as a puppet but vertical, his body convulsing, his right hand resting light on the truck bed. When I offered the Cope he pinched off a plug, nodded, and packed his chew. But when he reached for the Coke he missed, tipping it. I snatched the gurgling bottle and held it to his mouth the way trainers slosh water into tired boxer's mouths. Coldwell dropped below us, aiming the camera up — he later explained — to show Spade's power. As if.

“What drives you?” Coldwell said. He said it with a sense of wonder because he imagined himself, always, asking for millions of this generation and for those of generations to follow. More faces joined the mob in the alleyway. Bigger kids squirmed to the front to see, and daddies hoisted kids to their shoulders. How many had heard Coldwell's question, I couldn't say. But nobody spoke, including Spade. Like a punch-drunk fighter, he'd pounded into that wordless zone where words shuck their sense like a cicada's husk and survive in a man's woozy memory only as acts accomplished — bend, clip, rasp, fit, heat, shape, nail, clinch — painfully, one after another, with the promise of an end though until it ends even the word *end* lacks meaning. When he answered Coldwell with a wordless glare, Coldwell, undaunted, asked real low, “*Can you finish?*” And that question convinced me that Coldwell not only recognized the growing wedge threatening to split Spade and Charlie, he'd found the hammer to drive it home. Spade, on camera, twisted his stiff neck until he saw Charlie between Daddy and Judge, all waiting.

“I *can*,” Spade said, looking level into Charlie’s eyes.

But he couldn’t. Not just then. He was leg-locked. Idle for no more than a spoon of sand down the hourglass, and his legs had turned to posts. When he made his legs move, they tin-soldier stepped and he wobbled, caught himself, wobbled again, and fell. He thudded to his side, road-killed stiff, the steam thinning as his body chilled. The only sound was the gush of propane feeding the crazy blue flame in the forge. I wanted to drive him to a doctor but didn’t know what to do. Spade, I knew, could hate a man for a favor.

I looked to Lucy, who closed her eyes and stood blind as her momma when he crashed. I looked to Charlie, who shook his broad red face ever so slightly sideways. He lowered his head as if he meant to pray then settled his big sad eyes on Spade, who lay still, his twitching muscles locking him in themselves now, sweat and sawdust crusting in his chest hair. For a second or two Charlie mouthed words that lacked voice. But when they found sound, it came so slow and big it filled the barn. Coldwell whirled to film Charlie, who stood still and sad and though I can’t say for certain he showed shame, it seemed to be shame and rightly so. If we’d come upon a horse in Spade’s state, we’d have put a bullet in its brain. When Charlie stepped forward, Spade caught the motion and braced for the kick.

“Spade,” Charlie said. “You’ve earned yore supper. And a hot bath. We might even find ya a cold beer.”

A few guys gave nervous laughs. Everybody seemed ready for it to end because they were as prisoner to it as Spade, like witnesses who stop at a wreck. Spade didn’t answer, not in words. But his face muscles knotted tight as fists. And his fists, still gripped around invisible shoes and hammer handles, filled themselves with sand and sawdust. He squeezed as if he’d seized two pistols. He sucked air into lungs that ought to have folded themselves closed before he started. He lifted himself, pushup style, but couldn’t draw his knees under him. His quivering arms dropped his face into the dirt. Coldwell had lowered his camera, I wasn’t sure when. But he brought it up again when Spade gained his elbows. He snake-crawled toward the next horse, a dun gelding named Stripe for the dorsal stripe down his spine. I hustled to steady him.

“Rope,” Spade hissed. Stripe flew back when Spade snatched at dangling tail of the lead shank. The people who’d inched closer elbowed back into the crowd. Spade rolled onto his back,

“Give me it,” Spade said. “Unsnap the sonofabitch and give me it.”

I did. Spade sat up and wrapped his fists in each end of the rope then tossed a half-hitch loop around his right boot. He closed his eyes, bit his lip, curled his arms, and willed dead muscles back to life. The boot inched toward him, its heel carving a trench. His knee creaked, muscles popped free. His lips spit silent words, fast, as he strained. When he’d dragged his boot almost to his pocket, he let go a sign and painfully pushed his leg outright with its own muscles. He drew it to him again with the rope and stretched it again. The next time he drew it under him with only its muscles, so he set to work on the other one.

Shortly he was on his feet, steaming again from the sweat and strain, seeing only his forge. He fixed his eyes on it as if its blue flame were the light the dead see before returning. His walk wasn’t pretty, but it carried him to his tools. Twisting his shoulders side to side he tore loose the long, deep muscles that had held him like the straps of the strait jacket he ought to have worn. And again they began twitching like a dissected frog. But Spade fought them quiet, taking up his clippers and rasp and hammer and trudging to Stripe, who was so good to shoe he’d lift his hoof for a tap on his shoulder. I’d saved him for last, but doubted he’d be shod. Coldwell was filming again, telling his camera how Spade had risen from the ashes Like Phoenix. Miss Rosa told him low that the ashes thing was cliché and, besides, Spade had risen from sawdust and sand, Miss Rosa emphasized, his form closer “to the clay from which God made Adam.”

Adam was likely more upright than Spade, who gimped to his forge bent as a bow. When he hunched over that searing blue flame on the tailgate, shoe in tongs, half-naked, his wild hair crusted in sweat, sawdust, and sand, it was easy to picture him as First Man, with a caption that read, “Discovers Fire.” But more, it wasn’t so much that he’d discovered fire — he *was* fire. Or the fire was him. Or he was of and from it, child of Flame’s loins, burning burning burning, ember, blaze, or smoke, still a burning threat to all who touched and to itself because the very nature of fire is to devour itself. He gimped to Stripe. He knelt beneath him as if in prayer, then

gimped back to his forge as if for fuel enough to trim, and rasp, and nail again, shrouded again in his own steam, no longer because of a furious pace but because each motion now demanded the energy and will of an hour's motion earlier. His twitching muscles fought themselves and him until he barely moved, but move he did.

His hammer's ring fell to a tap. And when he'd clinched the last nail, too loosely to last but clinched nonetheless, he wobbled to the tailgate and sat looking at nobody, his face lost in wonder like a kid on the new board swing his daddy had just roped to the best maple in the yard. But when Spade gathered himself and peered at all the faces as if he were a man awaking from a dream, we all knew we had witnessed, as Coldwell said in his voice-over, "A mythical performance for love." Surely there were and are those who believe it was for the love of a girl. But those who saw Spade's face when Charlie sauntered over to inspect the last nails know the truth. Hardly looking at Spade, Charlie circled Stripe, bending to lift and pat each hoof. When he'd finished, he walked to Spade as the crowd waited. Hungry-eyed as a spent hound, Spade glared and held out his hand, palm up, as if to remind Charlie of pay.

"I *can*," Spade said. Charlie eased out his wallet and counted three one-hundred dollar bills. He nodded toward Stripe.

"Horse deserves better," he said.

Spade rocked back as if he'd been gut-punched, his face as twisted and trembling as his body. He squinted hard. His head settled into his trembling bare shoulders, steam thinning now in the cold. He seemed ready to fall. But the fire in him was still too hot. His fists opened and closed. When he raised his head again it was not to Charlie, but to all of us, his dark eyes brimming with pain and anger. Coldwell filmed from a distance, wary, like someone filming loggers dropping a giant oak that could fall in any direction.

"I damn well *can*," Spade said. "I *gotdamn* well can."

He turned, shuffled stiff legged to the truck, and dressed against the cold, his bent body throwing long shadows over us all in the light cast by the blue-flamed forge. He'd go to Mercedes now if he had to pry himself out of his truck with a bar. That I knew.

Yet why oh why oh why oh why, I wondered, could Charlie not find in himself for Spade the fatherly love he craved? And then I knew — or thought I knew — the answer. The presence of Lucy and Miss Rosa and Judge told me. Charlie was as broken as the rest over Evan's death. Why hadn't I seen it sooner? Had I thought Charlie too tough? If that'd been my thinking, I'd been wrong. Or had I missed it because Charlie so naturally played father to me and Lance. And then, in that odd way ideas take shape like cottonwoods coming into being as fog fades, I saw that Charlie fathered Lance and me because we didn't need it. We had our own families filling the void that Charlie called the "hole" in Spade. Spade, poor wild bastard child of the border town brothel, needed a daddy. To hold Spade as his son would carry commitment for Charlie, and committing was something none of the Barnes clan I'd met could any longer do.

That thinking, in Lucy's presence, led me to another dark question. Had she taken me — whatever "taken" meant — instead of Spade for the same reason? On the insomniac nights when I'd let myself wonder why they hadn't paired-up, I'd told myself it was because she was with Limp Dick when Spade joined the Barnes camp and once that she and Spade had settled into their sibling role, they couldn't shed it. Other times I'd told myself it was because she sensed in Spade a wild she couldn't tame. But now I wondered if she'd seen in him a hunger for love she lacked the emotional sustenance to feed.

The barn seemed suddenly cold and sad when Spade killed the gas to his forge and the flame died, filling the air with silence and cold and darkness that fluorescent alleyway lights couldn't brighten. The crowd had drifted away unceremoniously leaving only Lucy's kin and mine and us, except for Coldwell and Spade. Stiff as a cooling corpse, Spade heaved his tools into the truck, slammed the tailgate, and wedged himself into the seat so painfully that I hurt watching him. Turning the key demanded energy he lacked. But somehow he fired the engine, ground the shifter into a gear, and set the little truck loping past us, leaping like a rocking horse. He held his dark hollow eyes straight ahead and clung to the donut as if it alone held him up. In a moment he vanished into the arena and out the far gates for the long drive to Tulsa.

Coldwell panned our faces. It was one of those tense silent times when people either talk

about trivia or else they don't talk at all. We were good with silence. I half expected Charlie or Lucy to say something snide about what Spade wouldn't be able to do by the time he got to Mercedes, but nobody said anything. I couldn't imagine the next six months in the rig with Charlie and Spade. I couldn't even imagine us rolling out to Denver ten days later. Even if I'd been able to imagine Denver, I'd have been like the proverbial tick on an elephant, unable to imagine beyond my own little speck of that tremendous moving hide or have any idea of the direction the force of its motion was carrying me. Only in the vaguest way did I sense that something in Spade he'd long kept alive --- or that had kept him alive --- had just died.

Chapter Twenty-Six

One journalist for the *Denver Post* wrote afterward that the camera lured Spade like water lured Narcissus. I say it wasn't the camera. If not for the sheer mad promise that Coldwell bore in his every pore, the camera would never have filmed a frame of Spade. Some folks find hope in God. Plenty of cowboys kneel to the Arena Gods. But by the time Coldwell scripted himself into our lives, Spade had scant reason to believe in either. So he'd baptized himself into Coldwell's Religion of Instant Reward, no waiting for a distant Promised Land on earth or Heaven, no need whatsoever for patience. It was the *instant* that mattered most to Spade, not the medium to carry him home. So to my thinking it was Coldwell himself, cloaked in his eternal optimism for Instant Reward, who drew Spade to his fate.

As any man is prone to do after tragedy, I compared the swirling news stories to all I knew, or thought I knew, to be true. In Spade's own telling, he had come to Charlie's saddled with a past that rode heavy. During the short investigation, reporters documented and wrote that he had, in fact, been "found as a swaddled newborn on the cold stone steps of a Texas border town brothel." One TV station sent a crew to the boarded-up ruins where it had stood in a cactus patch suburb of El Paso. The brothel part was right, Spade claimed. He was practically proud of it. But he'd always insisted to us that he wasn't abandoned by outsider parents the way "found" by the working girls implied. Instead, he'd been torn from one of the girls there, daddy unknown, and whoever did the tearing told the first "found" lie that everybody afterward repeated. Truth or not, Spade needed to think he'd been *torn* from his momma, that whatever the nature of her damnation, she had not surrendered him without struggle. Coldwell had only a few days ago shot a rendition of Spade's tale that the media somehow seized.

"I was raised by twenty mommas and a thousand daddies up to the approximate age of my first boner," Spade said for the camera. All balls and bravado, he'd puffed his chest and jutted his stubbled chin. "The second they saw my flexed pecker, they shipped me to a boys' home lest I become a mother-you-know-what, whichever one she was."

"What if you had?" Coldwell had challenged. He'd filmed the footage in the truck on I-

70 as we drove to Denver. “If you had bedded your own mother? Would you, a la Oedipus, have blinded yourself upon discovering the truth?” It was a made-for-Reality-TV question Spade ought not have answered. But he did. His brooding eyes blazing, he lapsed into the nonsensical media mockery that had caused rodeo reporters to shun him.

“All women are my mother. All men are my father. All boys are my brother. All girls are my daughter. It matters not where a dog buries his bone, but that he flees the darkness of sleeping alone.”

“I s-e-e,” Coldwell’s voice replied off camera.

Some reporters are already saying that Spade, Mercedes, and Coldwell formed a lethal love triangle. Words like those set folks to thinking that it was just Spade and Coldwell battling over Mercedes which, like all partial truths, is a lie. Though this is new thinking to me, I now sense (without evidence, I know) that besides fearing Spade, Coldwell loved him. And like anybody in love, he loved that which he lacked in himself. I see that in how he’s grieving now. Though I only now see it, I believe he loved Spade so much, and wanted to *become* him so badly, that he was sometimes jealous of Mercedes. It was as if he used Mercedes’ attention to retaliate for Spade’s failure to love him in return. Yet he *Longed* for Mercedes so much, too, that he raged jealous of Spade. What a torn mind the little dude endured. But he and the media weren’t the only ones thinking Freudian.

Lucy called me the morning after the crash from her condo in Columbia and allowed the whole thing was an Oedipal wreck. She phoned me, sobbing, as soon as she saw the CNN morning edition. She was hurt and mad that we hadn’t told her, but the story had been zapped via satellite hours before Charlie and I freed ourselves from authorities. I was still in Denver, hiding in Charlie’s rig, when she called. Reporters and legal authorities prowled the grounds with questions, notepads, and cameras, rattling doors as if they had warrants. I’d told all I knew the night before, and that morning I’d retreated to a stack of blankets behind hay bales in the horse compartments of Charlie’s trailer to hide for a bit and maybe, if the Arena Gods might soothe my haunted mind, sleep. Over the phone, Lucy loped headlong into psychoanalysis, her way of

staving off grief, I allowed.

“Spade represents the father figure whom Coldwell loves but fears,” Lucy said, bold and clinical. “The drama of childhood development demanded that Coldwell slay him.”

“That makes Mercedes —?” I kept my voice low.

“You got it,” Lucy said. “Mother figure.”

“And that would make Coldwell a —?”

“It’s purely symbolic,” Lucy said. “A crucial growth stage, if you trust Freud.”

I asked Lucy did she recall what Elena had dubbed us all the morning Spade first pimped his pics of Mercedes to Coldwell.

“Los ninos perdidos,” Lucy said, her accent almost as natural as Elena’s. “The lost children, as in damned.”

“How’d that come to be?” I said. “Both parts of it. How come — except for Lance and Shannon — there wasn’t a one of us on the herd fit to play the parent?”

There was too-long quiet, then the first sob. It was, I suddenly dreaded, a pregnant pause of the literal specie. When Lucy spoke again, it was with a nervous edge posing an old rodeo riddle that packed its own answer. She might’ve heard it from Charlie or overheard it from any guys behind any chutes anywhere.

“What’s the worst piece of news a cowboy can hear?” she said. She sniffled, her voice full of apprehension. My lungs shut down. I was too numb to be surprised and too dumb to be tender.

“How far along?” I said. But my real question, cruel as this shows me, was whether the baby in her belly was mine.

“Our turkey baby,” she said. “I’m less than two months. You remember that November night?”

At first I didn’t. But her tone told me that “yes” was the only tolerable answer, so I lied while my memory worked to make it true. I flashed back to the Saturday night she’d surprised me in the alleyway between stalls at Charlie’s. I recalled — stirring the sudden sad embers of

loneliness I thought I'd snuffed — how she'd taken me inside her and kept me there as never before or since, the last time we'd shared sheets. That eerie night she'd drifted a little further past the front gate of her sanity than even she normally wandered. Since the day Spade like to shod himself to death, we hadn't seen one another. During the rare calls we'd traded, the unsaid had outweighed the said, and the little we said skimmed along on strained tones. I wondered if she'd just told me why. Everything about our deal had a done feeling to it, a love so weak it may as well have been stillborn. Everything felt dead but this news, that is. And then the horror of it hit me. And then the wonder. What horror would the kid know — what horror would it cause? — born to a mother too broken to love? But what wonder might it bring if it broke the Barnes' brooding doom and gave that whole splintered family tree a new limb where a single bloom might let them love again? Ashamed yet excited, I feared for my own folks' name. I spoke low, breathless.

“When were you going to tell me?” I said. “I mean, did it take a . . . you know, to make you call?”

Crabby people rapped at Charlie's doors, calling out their credentials, asking for Charlie or me. Charlie had taken his horses to the arena before light for the morning's slack, something outsiders wouldn't know about. The rodeo world rolled on in the muffled after-tones of tragedy.

“I'll take care of it,” she said.

“As in diapers and formula?” I said, “or as in — ?”

“I'll take care of it. I won't interfere.”

Her voice quivered. I was supposed to say something. I couldn't think. Reporters banged on the locked trailer doors and called my name. I kept waiting for another detective to announce himself. I whispered to Lucy that I'd call later.

“Tell me before you hang up,” she said. “Say our vow.” She sounded drugged. I was suddenly, crazily, afraid they'd find their way to her and that my folks might learn of Baby Chance on CNN. People yelled outside, rattling me.

“I promise,” I said.

“Not that,” she said sleepily. “Our vow, remember?”

It'd been fun once, the kind of phony boldness that fear breeds. Now it seemed hollow and cold as a snowed-over road tube. I wondered what our baby would look like. If she meant to have it. I wondered if I ought to find a lawyer, for lots of reasons.

“No matter,” she said, “*I don't love you.*” She clicked off.

So there I sat, huddled like a common barn rat behind hay bales in a horse trailer thinking about a dead hauling partner and a pregnant girlfriend while reporters and authorities camped outside. Turning pages as soundlessly as possible, I tried reading the *Denver Post* articles, thinking death the only word potent enough to silence the “pregnant pregnant pregnant” exploding my hollowed-out mind. I wanted to call Lucy. I wanted to go to her. I wanted to love her. And then I wanted to hate her. I wanted to murder her. I wanted to marry her. I wanted . . . wanted . . . wanted — I didn't know what. I just knew I wanted.

Orphanages led to foster homes for Spade, reporters said, which mostly translated to free ranch labor, frequent fights, juvenile detention, and more foster homes until he came of age. I'd heard most of it from Spade, some of it embellished, some edited. He'd drifted around Texas, day-working for ranchers, operating heavy equipment, and too often waking hungover and bloody in the gray-bar hotel. It was during one of his jail times for fighting that he met a deputy, Aaron Raines, who'd hauled with Charlie when they were still rodeoing on permits. The deputy liked Spade's wit and believed him honest as an April robin, so he got him a job in a local feed yard owned by the deputy's relatives outside Dalhart, Texas.

One article quoted the deputy: “That lad was badger fierce and mule strong. What he lacked in learnin', he made up for in hustle. It's a sham dame somethin' like this to happen just when he was set to make good.”

They even had a pic of the deputy, a grayed, pus-gutted guy closing on fifty. I tried to picture how he'd looked when he'd hauled with Charlie, to reverse time to the time before Spade, Lance, and I existed. This guy was the deputy who'd started Spade steer wrestling. The feed yard owners kept an arena for their cowboys, a good many of them weekend rodeo calf

roppers and steer wrestlers. When the deputy saw Spade's strength and hustle, he'd called Charlie and recommended Spade for an apprenticeship. That was more or less the way I'd heard it from both parties, and it was what the reporters wrote or told in camera as the background showed printed pictures or scrolled clips of Spade and burning plane he'd stolen from Lance that contained what remained of him. The news folks had their Who. They had their What, their When, and Where. But still they lacked their Why. Why had Spade stolen Lance's plane? Why had the engines caught fire before the tires ever cleared? Those were the mysteries.

What most interested me lay the size of a field mouse in Lucy's loin. I wished I could tell Charlie so he could pack a fresh pinch of Cope and we could get our thinking done. There seemed something godawful unsacred about a death and birth this close, as if one might hex the other. How, I wondered, might Coldwell try to script this new tidbit? That I might never know because he and Tedso had vanished only hours before the crash.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Charlie allowed, as if it eased his soul, that Spade didn't die all at once.

"Nobody ever does," he said. It was late-thirty. He and I were camped on the couch in his rig, half numb after the cops left, trying not to see Spade's ghost in clothes and belongings he'd left scattered among ours. He'd gone without even taking his shaving gear.

"Man dies a little each day," Charlie mused, "same way we live. Our yesterdays are always dead to us soon as we live 'em, Chance. That is, they're dead 'cept for the memories we caint kill and caint keep everhow hard we might try. Spent like last summer's wages. Our tomorrows aint nothin' but a notion of things that aint happened and may never. All dyin' does is make that fact permanent. Dyin' kills tomorrow. That's the damn shame of it. But it don't do nothin' to yesterday. Yesterday was already dead. We lived and died those days one by one. Can yore young mind hold that notion?"

I nodded that it could, but I wasn't sure I'd heard him. I'd been thinking of Lucy. And I'd been half-listening for any admission of his own role, some morsel of remorse he felt when the kindest thing he could say to Spade after Spade like to died working for one word of fatherly belonging was, "Horse deserves better." But I lacked the meanness to hurt Charlie just then, especially when something told me he felt what he couldn't let himself say. That trait alone marked him as a Barnes more boldly than any brand burned into that flawed family's butts could have done. They all felt what they couldn't or wouldn't say. I wondered what they'd say about Lucy's baby — and mine — if she kept it. Then I made myself stop thinking about them. As pained minds are prone to do, mine kept recreating reality, asking *why*, as if knowing *why* Spade had stolen Lance's plane might reverse the earth's spin and land him safely on the ground again.

"What put him in that cockpit?" I said. "He couldn't fly a damn kite."

"His cock's what put 'im in the pit," Charlie drawled. He needn't say, "Know which head yore thinkin' with" for me to hear its echo. Nor did he need evidence to convict Spade for thinking with the wrong head. He had no evidence. All we knew was that Spade had conned his way into the hotel room where Lance and Shannon were staying and somehow got Lance to tutor

him through a fake takeoff. Landing, Lance said, never entered their talk. So with his total experience being a mock takeoff in the a hotel room easy chair, Spade had idiotically attempted to fly without so much as contacting the control tower.

Not until the next day did the media reveal Spade's cell phone records, which did lend some credence to Charlie's thinking that Spade, perfectly in character, had been thinking with the wrong head. In the hours before he crashed, Spade and Mercedes had traded a half dozen calls. Media vultures had paid for the transcripts of each one. The transcripts proved little except that once again Spade frazzled himself into a get-to-Mercedes-or-die-trying mindset. A few calls were reprinted in abbreviated form:

Mercedes: He wants me to pick him up at the airport.

Spade: You going to?

Mercedes: Dunno. Should I?

Spade: That need an answer?

Mercedes: He's ringing in. Now he's texting me.

Spade: So?

Mercedes: It's my career, too, you know. You've got rodeo. I've got a fire pole.

Spade: Aint the fire pole he wants ya to slide.

Mercedes: Why always the filth, Spade? He's a gentleman.

Spade: Aint the gentle that matters, Sweet Child. It's the man part. The part of man he means to plant in you.

Mercedes: You make me feel cheap Spade.

Spade: That you aint, Sweet Child. That you aint. Sometimes I think you came with a big bright tag that said, "Price: One Life."

So the papers, radio, and TV news stations ran those pirated calls until they needed more. Desperate for anything new to hold their audience, reporters locked on a clip of us meant for the TV show that one of them dubbed "The Famous Final Scene." It wasn't meant to be a final

scene at all. That was completely ironic. It was shot two weeks before the call as the opening scene of Spade's character meeting Mercedes' character in Coldwell's now deadly little drama. The name alluded to the title of a Bob Seeger song somebody amongst them was old enough to recall. Nobody seemed sure how the clip had been slipped to media. Lucy said she had seen snippets streaming in news clips on TV and the Internet. I hadn't seen them aired, but I knew them. They featured Lucy and me with Spade and Mercedes. It was a scene Coldwell had staged a couple weeks earlier in Charlie's former arena kitchen after we'd revamped it with scrap boards into Coldwell's vision of the Just-Enough Club Bar and Grill. Coldwell had scripted what he called a Cute Meet to introduce the characters Spade and Mercedes were supposed to play. Cute Meet, he said, was a Hollywood device to bring key characters together for the first time.

"It is essential that the scenario seem plausible," he told us, his cool blue eyes calculating. And what, he reasoned, seemed more plausible than Spade's character flirting with pretty girls in a rodeo bar? Could anyone doubt that? Of course not. Hadn't he witnessed it himself in Vegas? Yes, but with the vow that "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." The hardest thing to believe about the whole deal was that Spade trusted Coldwell. I didn't believe it in Vegas when I learned Spade had taken him to pick up buckle bunnies on the strip, even if he did make Coldwell leave all electronics behind.

Selling the bar-meet scenario would be easy. The more complex thing would be to sell Mercedes' presence in a bar with her screen Daddy Charlie looming as an overprotective teetotaler. That's where Coldwell's script needed help from me and Lucy, characters already written into the script. Innocent Mercedes would party with irresponsible us while Daddy Charlie worked a distant rodeo.

Here's how the scene goes: According to script, Mercedes, Lucy, and I are seated at a booth with shot glasses of herbal iced tea posing as whiskey. Even the drinks are part of the act. Spade the Dangerous Stranger occupies the sorry little swaybacked stage we'd built, his guitar and lyrics lonesome enough to make a wolf chew off his own leg. He spots the three of us, rightly pairs me with Lucy, and satisfies himself that ringless Mercedes with her red ringlets

dangling just might could be the next notch on his bed. Coldwell added a digital audience to make the otherwise empty place appear packed. When Spade announces a break, the jukebox magically drops in an old George Strait rodeo song called “Amarillo by Morning.” Lucy and I leave the table to dance. Spade sashays over to Mercedes, who pretends to be reading *The Horse Whisperer* — Coldwell’s twisted idea. Spade tips his black lid, looks at Mercedes’ fake whiskey, and twists his lips awkwardly around Coldwell’s convoluted notion of cowboy bar talk. On cue, he braces his hands palm down on the table, leans toward Mercedes, and nods at her drink.

“For one of those,” he says, stiff as a starched collar, “you can sample my rare blend of wit, charisma, and animal magnetism.” Spade struggles not to laugh at his own ridiculousness. Left to his own words, Spade would’ve used the line that always worked, likely the one that had first brought Mercedes home. He’d spot the hottest unpaired girl and ease up to her with, “Hey, Honey, you look like you got a little cowboy in ya.” Girls almost always grinned or blushed or giggled and mumbled something back such as, “Why, thanks.” Then Spade would touch them in a safe spot, a forearm or shoulder, and say real low, “How’d ya like to have a little more?” Coldwell knew those lines, too. He’d heard Spade use them in Vegas. Maybe that was why he forced him instead to wrestle the overblown dialogue he’d concocted. Regardless of his motive, Coldwell herded Spade over the clunky lines. On camera, Mercedes raises her glass between their faces, tinkles the ice, and peers through it at Spade’s smirk.

“I’d prefer the next drink solo,” she says, a third-class Scarlett O’Hara accent, “and the one after that.” Her green eyes taunting, she touches the iced glass to her too-red, too-big lips. “It’s warmer than you. And less transparent.”

Despite their wooden acting, their natural heat burns through. And their heat melts their inhibitions. They speak more playfully, as if the lines were something they’d actually say.

“Best sheath that tongue before you slice a lip,” Spade says. “You know why you’re here.” He spreads his arms and turns a three-sixty as if modeling, shaking his butt stupidly as it passes closest to her. How he let Coldwell convince him, I don’t know. Mercedes sputters Coldwell’s lines as if they were spoiled milk.

“A soothsayer?” she says. Coldwell had defined it for her, tenderly.

“My reputation precedes me?” Spade says, as if he’d say “precedes.”

“In a book called *Little Red Riding Hood*. I see you’ve retained the same orthodontist.”

Coldwell defined orthodontist for her, too.

Spade leans lower, almost arches over her, but she stays straight as a lightning rod and just as grounded. Spade’s mouth is so close to her ear he can almost whisper. Coldwell drops below them for a close-up. George Strait croons: “Everything that I own / is just what I have on.”

“Do you know the cardinal rule of sexual warfare?” Spade growls, throaty as a diesel engine.

“Odd *diction* choice,” she says, hammering the first syllable as Coldwell coached her. She looks off clumsily off camera as if seeking his approval. “All’s dare in love and war?”

“Sure it’s war,” Spade says, suddenly seventh grade. “I *come* in here packin’ a loaded gun, and you *come* in here packin’ two heat-seeking missiles that just poked out of their silos.” The camera follows their eyes to her shirt front. She blushes on cue, a fresh little farm girl blush I’d have thought long burned out of her.

“I’m the genie you urned for, Angel Eyes,” Spade says, Coldwell’s dumb pun. On the day he shot the scene, Coldwell stopped filming right there to have Mercedes dab some ice on her lip like sweat beads. He’d ignored Lucy’s protests that the dialogue was too dumb for anyone old enough to change channels, answering that his test market subjects proved otherwise.

“Isn’t it past your bedtime?” Mercedes says next. “I think I heard your momma balling.” The line’s so dumb she smirks.

“Born without a momma,” Spade says. Now he looks toward the camera as if checking for Coldwell’s approval for the rehearsed lines. Coldwell’s mouth moved silently in sync as it had for the whole scene. “Bastard child of Rain,” Spade says, “sired by Fire. Call me Sizzle.”

“And Smoke,” Mercedes says. “Isn’t this a smoke-free dive?”

“You and I want the same thing,” Spade says. “For me to walk away from your table.”

Mercedes seems so surprised in the close-up Coldwell took that it’s obvious Spade had

left the script. Now, he's pure Spade.

"The difference is," Spade says, "you've deceived yourself into thinking you want me to walk away *without* you."

"One of us is deceived," she says, sticking to script, "on that we agree."

"If you'll hear my whole point and still want me gone," Spade says, flashing his Hollywood smile, "I'll point my bad self away from here and leave you with a heart pumpin' one-hundred-proof regret. Fair enough?"

Mercedes nods, warily, and looks to the camera. Spade softens his voice and speaks as gently as if asking a lost little girl in a parking lot where she last saw her momma. He pitches the script and stays pure Spade.

"Now," Spade says, his eyes boring into hers, "can we be honest?"

"I can if you can," she says. She seems scared, maybe a tad sad.

"Then *we* can," he says. That lost little boy hunger radiates from him now, a beguiling charm women always seemed deceived for a moment into believing he felt for each of them alone.

"Can you tell me," he says, "truth now, remember, that you went to all that work and expense to look as beautiful as you so guys would ignore you?"

Mercedes giggles, then lapses back to sad. I wondered if Spade had just cast to the world the very lines she'd thought intimate, theirs alone. And the lines had flowed as if they were smoothly contrived and rehearsed, which they likely were. Suddenly shy, Mercedes angled her blushing face away, her lips mashing hard against themselves. Spade, too coyote to think through things right, charged on anyway, maybe hoping Coldwell would miss what was happening with Mercedes, or maybe because he didn't know what else to do. He touched a finger to Mercedes' chin and raised it until their eyes rejoined. They each seemed to be asking the other for something they couldn't name, some way of ending the scene before it began. Coldwell would not have missed it.

"Eyes big and deep as yours don't just happen," Spade says, his tone almost apologetic.

He's speaking natural now, real bar lines that had eased more girls to bed than a night light. "That aint no stop-light, rearview makeup job. Huh-uh. And that hot little body, sweet and solid as a ripe grape. How many hours at the gym for that? How many hours shopping for the perfect jeans and blouse. Ummm, ummm, ummm. How many outfits did you try on tonight alone before that perfect little body of yours chose to honor that one? How many hours under infrared glare for that golden January tan?"

"Your point?" she says, bending her mouth into a smile.

"My point? My point is that after all you've invested — every cent and every minute well spent --- the greatest insult any man could offer would be to ignore you. You did not come here to be left alone. Nor to leave alone. And you aint telling ol' Spade you came here looking like you do to discuss quantum physics." The last line is back on script.

"What kind of a name is Spade?" she says, also back on script when Spade finally finds the line with his name. But it's too late. The scripted lines lacked play now, paled by the real, dangerous ones. I was surprised Coldwell kept filming. Now I wonder if they'd plunged into his real plot to end them. What if the surface script had been nothing more than his crafty way of not saying what he'd promised Spade in Vegas he wouldn't say? The lines were so hokey that Coldwell seemed to be parodying himself. Why? To prime Spade so he'd scrap the clunky crap for his own lines. And his own lines, which Mercedes had thought were hers alone, would make her know how many women they had seduced. Back on script, she asks him what kind of a name Spade is.

"The nick kind," kind Spade says. But he sees she's breaking.

"Your real name?" she says. She sniffles and dabs away a tear. Spade glances to Coldwell, sees him filming, and stays on script.

"On the only papers I got, somebody called me Lawrence Joseph Spader."

"Spade," she said, fighting tears now. Though Coldwell kept her hands off camera, her nails were clawing at the table the way she'd clawed at the apartment door jamb the day we met. "I *dig* it," she whimpers, desperate as a dying confession. She was supposed to raise her empty

shot glass, rattle the ice, and slide over in the booth so Spade could sit beside her, end of Cute Meet, end of script, next scene. But the script had gone bad wrong when it went from fiction to truth that made Mercedes see the fiction of her own life.

“Just one more question, honey,” Spade says.

Mercedes waits, her eyes misting, chin quivering. Spade sees it. The camera sure enough won't let us forget.

“Do you still want me to go?”

Mercedes dropped her head onto her folded arms and shakes as she sobs. Spade whirls toward Coldwell as if he means to rip the camera away.

“What the hell you filmin' that for?” he says, still on film. Tedso, his right hand inside his coat pocket, steps beside Coldwell, his eyes slitted. Spade coils, waits.

“Keeping it real,” Coldwell said off camera. This is the part the public won't see but I did. He'd stopped filming, lowered his camera, eased forward warily watching Spade, and touched Mercedes' shoulder.

“It's merely a script,” he said softly.

“No,” she said. She looked to Spade, her eyes accusing him of sins she had somehow, for all her short shady life leaping lap to lap, not seen. Her expression almost begged him to be who he was not and could never be. His dark eyes oddly soft he shrugged, sensing what Coldwell had done — or had let him to do himself. He seemed more humbled than mad, resigned to live and die among the unloved. Coldwell eases his camera up and films again as Mercedes seems ready to say something he wants known.

“It was real,” Mercedes mutters, “once.”

The camera captured her looking at Spade with the same tragic longing in those fathomless eyes that Coldwell had so long carried for her. But MIA Coldwell had become a person of interest, and so no one dared humanize him when American Cowboy Spade was clearly the victim of Coldwell's machinations. In the end, Coldwell would be convicted of no greater crime than making a sorry film and capitalizing on it when Spade at last gained the fame

he'd craved. In a warped way, they both got what they'd worked for — but neither got the girl. Mercedes got an agent (or vice versa, more likely) who booked her on the talk-show circuit where she spouted various conspiracy theories about Spade's assassination. Charlie allows she'll be slithering down poles again within a year.

As for what really happened, the authorities' final statement said Spade stole Lance's plane that blew up on takeoff, and the cause remained mysterious. One sentimental reporter playing to the public's romantic visions wrote that at the instant of the brilliant flash Spade saw one last time the look of longing in Mercedes' eyes that mirrored his own, the look that drew him — because it was as much from his own sad soul as Mercedes' — to his death. Until there's a better answer, that's as pretty as any.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

We laid Spade's ashes in the snowed-over bluestem sod of the little cemetery. A wicked January norther spun snowflakes the size of quarters hard across the bleak frozen prairie. A good crowd milled about, media swarming as Mercedes' agent staged her arrival in a white hearse. Coldwell and Tedso stayed gone, though Coldwell sent a bouquet of Texas Blue Bonnets. Lance had come as pallbearer without Shannon, who was close to delivering Little Charlie. Through boot-deep drifts we lugged the ceremonial coffin holding nothing but an urn of ashes. Charlie had bought the coffin and paid for the whole deal.

"Takes a day like this to get the last fire out of him," Lance said.

"Aint forgave 'im for wreckin' yore plane?" Charlie said.

"Never was safe to ride with," I said.

We carried the coffin inside the tent and set it atop the chrome rack straddling the mounded red dirt dusted with snow. Lucy eased close in front of me as some local preacher who knew Spade only from the news hustled through the Twenty-Third Psalm with chattering teeth. Lucy braced against me, wobbly enough to faint, her green eyes glassy as marbles when she turned from the grave to face me. She'd spent the night before with me in my apartment, crying herself dry the way I'd wanted her to do that long-ago night on the bluff. It was as if Spade's death had undone Evan's. Charlie and Judge flanked her, but Miss Rosa waited in the family car with Elena, who'd been reciting rosaries, sobbing sometimes and muttering, "Maldito, Maldito." My folks had driven six hours in a storm and rented a motel just to stand with me, laying steady hands on my arm and shoulder when I shook.

Lucy and I agreed to wait until after the grieving to tell of the baby. We'll find a time to tell everybody. What will a baby mean to us? To my folks? And hers? And Charlie? How can we know? We know what it doesn't mean, at least not just now. It doesn't mean marriage. Nor adoption. Nor abortion. It means somebody's got to raise it. It means somebody, no matter how hard it will be, has to love. She aims to finish grad school. I aim to rodeo, if Charlie will still haul me.

There's a bunch of rich rodeos left to be won, and even Charlie allows that I might could be just the man to win them. Since Spade died, we've tried to talk our way into the future. Still, our thinking too often drifts back to the dead. Charlie allows we'll tell ourselves the stories of Spade over and over, changing them a little each time, until it makes sense to us. The further we get from it, the more we'll have to change it, he says, making up what we forgot or never knew. He says we ought not worry over how we tell and retell it to ourselves. That's personal and matters only so far as how we see ourselves in this world. But he looks at me with those sad dog eyes and says he knows sure as thunder rumbles that I'll have to tell it to everybody, likely even write it down someplace.

"Be careful of that, Big Thump," he drawls. "The way a man tells a tale says more about the man than it does about the tale."

I tell him I'll keep that in mind.

END