



'This is just like science fiction used to be'
-Amazon

JOE ORANGE



THE

LIFT

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Sixth edition

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“The falcon lives between two
worlds— the earth where it rests, and
the sky where it rules.”

—ANONYMOUS

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Acknowledgments

To everyone who was so encouraging about seeing what came next in the Strange Detroit series, thank you so much. You keep the gas in the engine. And also, thanks to all those people that helped me in life, this goes out into the zeitgeist as a thank you to you as well.

CHAPTER 1

He loved going fast.

The problem was, the more you fell in love with going fast, the worse it felt being still.

Twenty-six-year-old Max sat there in his black leather jacket, blue jeans, and combat boots, mounted on his parked motorcycle, an ice blue 1975 Gold Wing GL1000, with his black hair greased back. He studied the parking lot of the low lime-green concrete building before him.

He blew on his hands to warm them, rubbing them together, while his lone headlamp illuminated an anomaly: a dead Cairn Terrier lying frozen solid against the side of the building. It seemed as though it had been in a fight with something with teeth and lost.

There were wild dogs around here, a small pack that roamed in the night. He had seen them when he came speeding through the snow-peppered streets of Detroit's abandoned industrial district, their shadowy bodies darting about in the darkness as he went. He had even slowed down and watched them spring

out of the shadows, only for him to speed down the street again as they came scampering after him, one only inches behind his back wheel.

If he stopped a moment longer, he might end up like the small terrier before him. Those dogs had a real wild streak in them.

He smoked two cigarettes while studying the dead dog, its fur frozen solid, its eyes glazed over, before the front door finally opened, spilling harsh fluorescent light onto the snow-covered steps. There in the doorway was a old man with a small gray mustache and short white hair.

"You must be the new guy, Max," the old man said, introducing himself as Lou.

"That's what they tell me," Max replied, killing his headlamp and dismounting. He climbed to the bottom of the steps where he met Lou with a handshake. Lou's hands felt like leather.

"Riding with no gloves in this weather. Either brave or stupid."

Max smiled. "My girlfriend, Natasha, laid them out for me on the kitchen table, but I forgot them. I guess I'm just stupid."

"At least you've got someone who cares. That's something. You can't be that stupid to win that lottery."

"Yeah," said Max. "She has been good for me."

"They tell you what you would be moving?"

"Waste," Max said with a shrug. "Hazardous stuff."

"And you're good with that? Because if you're not, this isn't going to work out."

"I don't care, as long as I get paid," said Max. "I need the money."

"All about the paycheck?"

"These days, pretty much."

"Sounds like the words of someone about to move up in the

world.”

“That’s the only direction I want to move,” said Max.

Lou took out a plastic bag and shook some air into it. He handed it to Max. “Well, the first bit of moving you can do is put that dog into this bag.”

They walked down a cold hallway with Max carrying the dog wrapped in plastic under his arm. The flooring was decaying vinyl, and the walls were a cool paint-chipped blue. The first door they opened was a fire exit that came out on the back courtyard where a frozen dumpster sat. Lou collected the dog from Max, walked to the dumpster, and placed the dog inside.

Max saw a black Cadillac Escalade across the road, nestled at the corner of a crossroads.

Lou saw him looking. “They are with us. We have someone in the building out front, and then someone always in a vehicle out back.” The latch of the dumpster was not closing correctly, and he walked around to inspect it. Something was caught in the hinge.

“You need help?” Max offered, coming down.

But Lou held up a hand. He found some stray wire stuck in the hinge and pulled it free, rolling it up in his hand as he inspected around the dumpster for any more problems. The lid of the dumpster now closed.

“I was wondering if my motorcycle was good out front,” said Max. “But I guess if you have a set of eyes out there.”

“Even if we did not have any muscle watching the front and the back, no one takes anything from around here anyway. They all know who owns this place.” He paused, then added, “I take it that who owns it has been made crystal clear to you?”

“Yeah, I know who owns it,” Max said, hands in his pockets. “Theodore Benson.”

"I heard you worked for him, putting in a pond or something."

"Yeah," said Max with a smile. "Up at one of his properties in Indian Village. It was a weeklong job, but I never met him, though."

"If it were not for your former cellmate, just so you know," said Lou, climbing the steps to the door with Max stepping out of his way, "you would not be here. He vouched for you. And he happens to be my nephew."

"He was a good cellie," said Max. And he was. In jail, where Max had been locked up for working at one of Detroit's most infamous chop shops on the West Side, Gordon—whom Max used to call Gordie—had the two best qualities you could hope for in a cellmate. The first, and most important, was he was not a psychopath. And the second was he loved nothing more than the smell of burning rubber while he had control of the steering wheel.

"Gordon says you're into cars in a big way," said Lou, closing the back door.

Max smiled widely. "I am. But really, it's anything with four wheels."

"Then why are you on a motorbike?"

Max reflected. "Judge said I can't own a motor vehicle for the next five years. He tacked it onto my parole. He said I have a problem that needs fixing."

"Must be some problem," Lou said, returning to the steps.

"Yeah, well, the judge thought so."

"Well, if you are wondering, the 1997 Toyota Corolla down the street is mine," said Lou. "It's got four hundred thousand on it and still runs fine. As I always tell my wife, there is a reason why the Taliban drive them."

"Toyota makes reliable cars."

When they were back inside, Lou added, “It’s nightshift from now on, so I hope you’re a night owl.”

“Never been anything else,” Max said.

“The job is five days a week. Monday to Friday. Your hours are midnight to seven in the morning, when all is said and done.”

“Sounds good.”

Lou showed Max the kitchen. Nothing much was inside apart from tins of coffee, a sink with two tan 60-ounce thermoses sitting inside, and a hot water dispenser.

Next, they came to the office. A dusty electric typewriter from the early 1990s rested on the desk, alongside a green rotary phone whose cord had gone yellow with age. Boxes filled the rest of the space. Lou explained it was mainly used for storage, since they never did legit paperwork.

When they came to the changing rooms—the next door in the hallway on the left—a row of six lockers greeted them. Below them, a rack held a dozen sets of red coveralls, with steel-toed rubber boots arranged neatly underneath, ready for the next shift.

“All right, well, get changed,” said Lou, leaving the room. “I’ll get you a new utility belt.”

Max removed his leather jacket and got changed into the red coveralls. In one of the rubber boots, he found something: a Chinese takeaway menu. The paper was creased and worn, marked with a diagram of circles and squares in pencil. An arrowed line extended from one side of a circle, marked ‘two miles.’ Below were a bunch of numbers that seemed like whoever marked it up was working their way through some type of calculation involving forty minutes.

Max just stared at the numbers. They made no sense to him, so soon he found himself looking at the price of the Kung Pao

Chicken, which wasn't bad, price-wise. Working nightshift felt strange; when he finished, he had the entire day ahead of him.

He might get some Chinese on the way home. A part of him wondered if those dogs would be out there.

He might even slow down for them again, but this time kill his motorcycle's engine to see if the little snappers could catch him. He would have to time it just right, so he could start it up and get away. But of course, that was half the fun.

There was an alternative, though. At one street corner just down from where the dogs were, there was a dip in the road that had made a perfect death trap. Max often made a point of noticing such things so he could play around with them later. This death trap had a perfect dip in the road covered in a thin coating of black ice from a leaking fire hydrant.

If he could get those little snappers to chase him and he could take that corner right, he could send them all sliding like small hockey pucks. Of course, if he did not take the corner right, then it would be him that went flying into the snow bank. Then those little snappers would have their way with him.

Tonight, on the way home, he would take a good look at the corner.

Sometimes he thought something was wrong with him. He always relished the feeling of being an inch away from everything going wrong. He was not sure why, but that feeling had consumed him all his life. The feeling that came from walking out on the edge of a building and staring down at the road below, moments from death. The heels of his boots barely catching the ledge.

Natasha had said he was different, and he sure was that, but she said she liked that about him. He remembered first meeting her at the Michigan State Fair.

Max had seen her across the crowd, standing in that faux leopard coat with those large looped earrings and short hair—every bit like a young Mia Farrow. She was with her sister in the shadow and lights of those nighttime rides a year ago. Their eyes locked. He cut in line and jumped over the fence, stole the fedora off the giant carny's head, then leaped into one of the ferris wheel buckets as it ascended. Below, the carny shouted up at him, but Max rose higher and around until, from above when the carny stopped the ride, he called out and asked her name.

She blushed like a summer rose, and it was the start of something beautiful.

That night they had raced through the city on his Honda while she rested her soft chin on his shoulder. The entire world felt as though it was made for them. Every violent corner, every soft nook, and everything wild and tame between—all theirs in the deep night.

“You thinking of ordering something on your way home?” asked Lou, returning. Max was still holding the Chinese menu.

“Thinking about it,” said Max. He stood and walked over and put the menu in the bin. He was tempted by the deep-fried chicken. He liked his fried food.

Lou handed him a shrink-wrapped utility belt. “I assume you have a cellphone?”

Max put on the belt. There were loops around it to put tools in and a small carry pouch. He liked it. “Yeah, I got one.”

“The equipment below will destroy any sensitive electronics, so it's best to leave it up here.” Lou walked to the clothes rack, retrieved a respirator, and handed it to Max. It had an air filter on the front and a tinted yellow face visor. “You can leave your respirator off until we get to the end of the hall.”

They finished changing and made their way back down the hallway, their boots echoing. At a heavy door, Lou pointed to another entrance on the right and came to a stop.

“Shower rooms,” he said.

Max pulled out his pack of smokes, gesturing to ask if it was all right to light up inside. Lou answered by taking out his own packet, and they both lit up.

“I take it you’ve had a shower before?”

Max gave a wide smile. “Yeah, a few as a matter of fact.”

“Well, at the end of each shift, that’s what you do. Wash down good. And there are industrial washing machines in there for your coveralls.”

They continued down the hall, approaching a series of double doors at the hallway’s end. Purple light seeped through the glass panels. Lou took one last drag of his cigarette, then threw it on the floor and ground it out with his work boot. Max did the same. They pulled on their respirators. The amber visor now muted the purple light, turning it a reddish color. Lou circled Max, checking the seal.

“Well, after you,” Lou said, his voice muffled by the plastic. “Welcome to the can factory

They emerged onto a metal platform where a wide ramp before them went down to the warehouse floor six feet below. Before them in the storage area, industrial humidifiers at all four corners pumped out clouds of constant vapor. At the loading bay at the back, hundreds of barrels lay framed by two forklifts and a half-closed giant curtain that hung before a massive roller door. But it was the structure in the center that he was looking at—a twenty-foot-high black metal sphere, isolated

within thirty feet of empty space. It was housed in a welded metal cradle wrapped at its base with black plastic, where hoses snaked beneath to connect with a series of pressurized tanks and a simple control panel fifteen feet away. Another metal ramp led up to the sphere's oval opening.

"I figure you got two questions right about now," Lou said through his respirator, starting down from the top of the ramp. "The first being what that thing is in the middle, which looks like a giant snow globe. The other is what the hell is in all these barrels."

As they came down the ramp, Lou gestured toward the barrels. "Those are why you have a job. That's a mixture of toxic waste and biological contaminants—comes from all over, smuggled inside the back of gas tankers. Mr. Benson has his own network.

"From those tankers, it makes its way to a warehouse across town, which packages it and brings it here," Lou continued, meeting the wall of drums. "All of them gasket sealed and shrink wrapped. That's why we work under black lights—our respirators make everything look reddish outside, because they filter out certain parts of the UV spectrum, but any liquid which spills from those drums will show up as slightly fluorescent. UV light also protects against certain biological contaminants. We don't really know what is in those drums. So the light stays on any time there are drums sitting in the warehouse."

He turned to face Max directly. His respirator's visor was slightly fogged. "If at any time there is a seal break—hasn't happened yet because we are careful—we have a special number we call. We don't try to clean up any mess. You get out and call the number."

Lou pointed upward at the humidifiers. "Humidity is always kept high here for a reason. Keeps the dust down. Other than

that, we have a small room to the right which has an ice maker inside it. You will understand why in a little bit. All this will make sense.”

He directed attention to the black sphere. “And now we get to the most interesting part of all this: that large snow globe-looking thing we call the lift. It takes us somewhere to offload all the waste.”

“It doesn’t look like a lift,” Max observed, studying the strange sphere. Through breaks in the black plastic around the iron housing, he was pretty sure he could see empty space underneath.

“Well, it’s a lift.”

They approached the sphere. Lou picked up a mechanical timer from a metal bucket beside the sphere. The timer had a piece of string attached to it. He demonstrated winding it for Max before he placed it around his neck.

“Now here’s where we get to the important details,” Lou said, adjusting his respirator. “Take note that there’s a bucket with mechanical timers here. Each with a length of string taped to them so you can put them around your neck. You will need them, and that will make sense, once again, in a little bit.”

Lou climbed up the metal ramp leading into the sphere’s oval mouth. The opening was ten feet high and four feet wide—just large enough for a small forklift.

“Push the lever forward,” Lou instructed, pointing at the base of a panel with all those gauges on it.

Max stood across from him at the control panel—a square board with a set of gauges in its center. At the base of the board, mounted on railway wooden sleepers, sat a heavy lever. Hoses ran in both directions from the lever toward the pressurized tanks and to a metal structure in the cradle under the lift.

“Pull it back,” Lou commanded through his respirator. “You have to put your back into it.”

Max gripped the lever and pulled. It seemed stuck, but then he pulled hard, and it came halfway.

“Right the way back,” Lou urged.

Max planted his boot against the base of the railway sleeper and strained against the lever until it finally gave way. Now all the gauges had come to life, and he could hear the hissing of air.

A metal structure under the lift—the housing which the sphere sat within—started vibrating, something that resonated through the greater sphere itself.

“Get up in here with me,” Lou called from inside the sphere. “We only got a minute.”

Max climbed into the sphere’s mouth. The interior was covered in strange patterns engraved and embossed into the inner shell—swirls and lines that seemed to follow no logical pattern. In places, the markings looked like the frenzied clawing of some wild animal; in others, the surface was smooth as silk.

“When I was talking about any sensitive electronics getting ruined, this is the reason,” Lou explained. “This thing will wreck anything with a chip in it. And you don’t even have to be inside it. I mean anything.” He paused. “General rule is, if it’s made post-Vietnam, or says Made in Taiwan, we don’t bother having it anywhere near this thing.”

Max studied the intricate patterns covering the interior.

“You have to pay attention now,” Lou said. “When you pull that lever, you set three things in motion. This entire setup, what we call the lift, runs on compressed air. The air powers a simple motor. It spins and creates a specific vibration that this thing reacts to. It’s just simple moving parts, but there’s a

precise rhythm to it—way above my pay grade.

“When that vibration gets into this thing, it creates its own vibration. That’s when the magic happens. Then the door closes, like a mousetrap. You need to stay out of its way at all times. It’s just the outer shell closing, after which the machine takes over and does what it does.”

“And this is a lift?”

“Yeah, it’s a real express elevator to hell.”

The whole chamber inside the sphere began to vibrate like they were inside a massive bell, the metal walls humming. Max could feel it move up through his boots, up his spine, and into his head.

“When it starts ringing out like this, you have about fifteen seconds until we’re moving. That means you have to be out of the way of the door. Otherwise, you will be coming home in pieces.”

The door shut so fast Max could not see it moving. One moment an opening and then darkness. Max felt a strange sensation, as though his body was being pulled in all directions at once for a split second. The vibrating stopped abruptly, leaving behind a silence so complete he could hear his own heartbeat. And the door opened, just as fast as it had closed, and beyond was something that Max found himself struggling to make sense of.

The blinding white light flooded through the opening, so intense it made him squint even through the amber visor on his respirator. The heat was all around him now—everywhere, inescapable.

Before them stretched an endless plain of cracked white earth, like a salt flat extending to the horizon. The entire landscape seemed like dry newspaper about to catch fire.

“Well,” said Lou, “you seem to be dealing with it better than most. Usually people are down on their knees about now, or howling because of the change in temperature.”

The waves of heat rolled over Max.

In the distance, black spheres identical to theirs dotted the landscape like ebony marbles half-buried in the salt-crusting ground. Each one seemed to be sinking, as if the dry ground itself was swallowing them.

Fifteen feet away, something that resembled a tar pit bubbled, but if it was a tar pit, even in the respirator Max thought he should be able to smell fumes. But there were none. A wooden platform with an access ramp encircled it, the wood weathered by exposure to the extreme elements.

“This is pretty weird,” Max managed to say, his throat already dry. He felt like he was dreaming.

“Weird is only half of it.” Lou waited, then removed his respirator, pulled out his cigarettes and lit one. “It’s like working inside a furnace. One hundred and sixty degrees Fahrenheit in the shade.”

Lou led Max forward down the ramp out of the mouth of the sphere, his boots leaving indentations in the salt-crusting ground.

“Take off your respirator. You don’t need it here unless you’re hauling waste.” Lou watched as Max removed his mask and color came back to the world. The light was sharp and hurt his eyes.

“The air is thinner, but no thinner than if you’re at higher altitude. You’ll adjust. Relax and breathe normally.”

Max held up a hand to shield his eyes. “Where is this place?”

“Well, there are twin suns in the sky. So we’re really not in Kansas anymore. We know that much.”

Max glanced at the sky, where he saw two suns. The light was so sharp he could only glance at it before he had to shield his eyes again.

“They call it a binary star system. The gravity here feels the same as home. Air, almost the same, although a bit thinner.” He gestured at the sky above them. “There is no night here—there is only day. Twenty-four seven.”

Max took in the alien world, his mind trying to process everything. Lou walked to his side and pointed out a metal ramp ten feet away which rose half a foot to a wooden platform surrounding the pit of black liquid.

“Usually you’ll be riding a forklift with a load on it,” Lou explained. “You drive the forklift out, up the ramp. You stop, and you dump the load right into the pit.” He watched the dark surface. “That pit seems endless. Each day I think it’s going to fill up, but it never does.”

“What’s in there?” asked Max. He knew it was not tar because he had been to a tar pit before and it came with heavy fumes.

“It’s about the same degree of consistency as water, but it’s black, like someone poured dye in there. And that’s about all I know at my pay grade. We take the barrels, we dump them in there, and they are not a problem anymore.” Lou thought for a moment. “The guy before you. He found it hard to deal with this place. At least at first. Then he was fine with it. But it took a while.”

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s in Disneyland somewhere. He just went home and never showed up to work the next day.”

Max’s eyes drifted to the other spheres scattered across the landscape. “There are more out there.”

“Yeah, well, nothing comes out of any of them. I am unsure

why. Maybe someone out there, between the stars, is dialing the wrong number.” Lou shrugged. “Anyway, follow me.”

They walked behind their sphere, where Max could see a dozen more black spheres stretching out for miles into the horizon like submerged grapes on some underground vine. The closest one was only a hundred and twenty feet away to his left, behind an array of twenty solar panels.

In the distance were dozens of giant mesas that rose from the land like toadstools and were spread out across the landscape—four in a cluster a few miles away. But instead of being solid, they seemed as though, from what he could see at such distance, they were riddled with giant holes.

Behind their sphere, under a large space blanket canopy that flapped weakly in the hot air, sat an old 1960s Philco refrigerator with a disconnected gas generator beside it. A two-inch sheet of lead ran up against the end of the sphere, shielding both appliances. The fridge drew power through a heavy cable that stretched a hundred feet to the solar panels to the left.

Two standup electric fans flanked the refrigerator, and a few feet away sat a pair of deck chairs. Lou reached for a box of cheap plastic wayfarer sunglasses on top of the fridge and put on a pair before blindly handing another to Max, who slipped them on. The brutal glare was now manageable. Everything at least now was visible without squinting.

Lou switched on both fans, and they stood in the warm air. Max felt it run over him while Lou walked to the refrigerator, releasing billowing cold air. There was a lot of room inside. The bottom shelf was filled with cold drinks and boxes of granola bars. On the second shelf was a bucket of ice, and on the third shelf was a record player with two dozen records stacked beside

it.

Lou grabbed two plastic bottles of Coke, twisted the tops off, and handed one to Max. "If Coke was up here, they could do a hell of a commercial," he mused, drinking.

"What's with the records?" Max asked.

"Well, sometimes out here you have a few minutes to kill." Lou finished his Coke and burped. Then he reached down to a cooler beside the fridge and opened it. Inside were two speakers. He collected a stray power cord and brought it to the record player, plugging it in along with the lead to the speakers.

"Pick something," he directed.

Max surveyed the records and chose something at random: Jean-Luc Ponty Cosmic Messenger. Lou took it from him and placed it on the record player, brought down the needle. The speakers came to life with what Lou said was a good choice. The music was only instrumental.

"Once you get some age on you," said Lou, "you will start to realize something about life. There are two types of men. Those that put on their aftershave for those around them. And those that put it on for themselves." He paused. "If you are lucky enough to wisen up and become the latter, and not everyone does, it's only a short trip to the land of instrumental and fusion jazz."

Max was not sure what he meant. Everything was so hot.

"At the end of the day, the older you get, the less words you need in your life anyway," said Lou. "I just want the sound, without all the noise. If that makes sense."

"Sure," said Max, drinking.

They surveyed the mesas. The heat waves rolled over them. Max wiped sweat from his head—it was now running, pouring out of him. His body felt attacked, but Lou seemed unbothered.

He stared out with his light blue eyes as if he was seeing something invisible out there while the solo piano came through the speakers.

“Something else, isn’t it,” said Lou. “It proves there is an entire world out there that is not just one flat plain of white.” Lou said the bases of them were full of thousands of caves, citing the time he had brought through a telescope.

Max wondered how far away the closest cluster of four mesas were. He guessed a few miles. The other ones were much further, maybe twice that of the closest cluster. And even more beyond that.

“It’s like giant termites have had their way with them. The bottoms are also much thinner, as you can see even from this distance. It’s like long ago they were all standing somewhere that had ocean waves crashing up against them. I guess if that was the case, all the water is now mostly gone.”

Max asked if he had ever been out any further.

“How?” Lou asked. “Even if you went out there, you would die before you could ever make it back. Unless you figured out how to put a swimming pool on wheels. Anyway, this is our mousewheel right here. Mr. Benson is clear about that. This is our playground.”

Lou pressed the bottle against his forehead. “You can’t eat on the other side, for obvious reasons. But if you need a snack, you take one of the granola bars in there and go at it. It’s just sugar, but it keeps you going.” Lou held the bottle against his head again and said it would be perfect if it was glass.

“Why don’t you get glass?”

“When I bought the telescope, I had to put it in a lead sleeve. If I didn’t, the glass lens would’ve fallen apart on this side. Glass doesn’t travel well through the lift. No glass bottles. It’s like the

solar panels—I had to bring those through in lead-lined boxes, too. And that was a lot of work.

“There’s a wide range of things that don’t travel well through the lift,” he added. “We used to use the generator until we figured out the lead thing. Now it just sits there. I make sure to start it now and then, keep it working. It’s still good as a backup. Even though in this heat, the generator is prone to catching fire or breaking down.”

“So the generator came through fine?”

“Yeah, no problems with that. Like I said, it’s only certain things—glass, some other stuff, and sensitive electronics. Things with a microchip. The solar panel inverter had to have a lead box around it.”

Max drank his entire Coke in one go. He approached the fridge and studied the ice.

“Go ahead,” Lou encouraged. “Just note, when it gets empty, it’s your job to fill it up. Just like it’s your job to fill up everything in this fridge.”

Max scooped up some ice and ran it over his head and down his neck. Spotting the water, he poured some over the back of his head, through his hair. The water evaporated almost instantly in the intense heat, even with the air from the fan on him.

“So what is this thing?” asked Max. “That lift, or whatever you call it.”

Lou replied at length. “Some people say it fell out from behind the Iron Curtain when the Soviet Union fell. Others say it was dug out of some mountain somewhere in China by some general who shipped it out in secret to the West to sell it.

“When I was first on the job—this was twenty years ago—I worked with a Japanese man, Jupijn. He said he heard it came

from the ocean. The divers discovered it while searching ruins off the coast of India. It lay inside a temple, submerged for so long the civilization which built it was lost to time.

“Within the temple stood an unknown language and giant sculptures of some monstrous sea creature. I’ve always remembered this version of its origin the most. Mostly because Jupijn, a true criminal, a counterfeiter, became obsessed with finding its source. This was his conclusion.

“Anyway, here’s what we need to know—if we get in one end, we travel here. We dump our loads, and we head back for another. And it repeats, over and over again.”

“It does not seem to have any moving parts?”

“The only moving part on the lift is the outer shell, which closes around the inner one. Nothing else. The cradle holding it, creating the vibration the lift responds to, and everything else, has been added. I heard when it was first discovered in the temple—if the story is even true—the ancients would strike it with a large iron object hanging from chains to make it move. So it really was like a bell. A bell whose ring transported it somewhere else.”

“The strangest thing is, on this side you don’t need to strike it with anything or have a cradle. It will return anywhere. Jupijn used to say the sphere here and the one in Detroit were like two tennis balls. A tennis racket hits them, they exchange places, and everything freezes. Then everything snaps back, like it’s connected by some rubber band. Now, that might be the Sesame Street version, but that’s all there is.”

Lou went on, reflecting. “Something like this could’ve solved air travel, changed transport forever, fed the hungry in the blink of an eye. But instead, because it landed in the hands it landed in, it just became some fancy garbage disposal that, every forty

minutes, gets hit by the racket again.”

“What do you mean, every forty minutes?” asked Max.

Lou checked his plastic timer, the mechanical hands ticking steadily against the weathered face. “There is no control over it. None. It’s just a good old-fashioned mystery. Once the machine comes here, then, and this is ninety-nine percent of the time, every two thousand, four hundred seconds, give or take, the sphere returns to Detroit and the one currently in Detroit returns here. And if you’re not on board when that exchange happens, then you’re stuck here, unless someone pulls the lever back there to go batter up again.”

After Max absorbed what he said, Lou went on as if the number was holy. “Two thousand, four hundred seconds is forty minutes. As I said, that’s ninety-nine percent of the time. The other one percent of the time, and sometimes less than that, it’s ten thousand, two hundred seconds. About three hours. I have no idea why it changes to that, one out of a hundred runs roughly, but it does. It changes that one percent of the time.”

Lou lit another cigarette, stuffing his packet away. “We call it the BBQ run. That one percent of the time it hits three hours before it returns. Because when you’re done, after an hour and a half out here, you feel like you’ve been on the BBQ.”

“If someone gets a BBQ run, can’t someone back in Detroit pull the lever so they come back sooner?”

“It doesn’t work like that. Once the lift does its thing, you have to let it finish doing its thing. You can’t just hit it with the racket on the other end. Anyway, we’re only concerned with forty minutes, because that’s almost always all we get. So burn the number into your mind.”

2

CHAPTER 2

Max stood in the cold shower. Everything still felt unreal. The heat, the unbreakable heat, seemed like something far away. The chance of dying was everywhere in that landscape. Just standing there it felt like it was killing you—because it was. It was exciting. He wondered what was out there and what it would feel like to fly along that plain in something with a real engine on it. Maybe a 1970 Plymouth HEMI 'Cuda, with all the trimmings: nitrous oxide, performance camshaft, supercharger, manifold, and everything else great and small the people of earth had made.

Wind her up and let her loose, and tear up some of that alien land. He could almost hear the engine roar, it was so vivid. The twin suns were not piercing those dark tinted windows, so black, it was almost like night in there.

He would keep on spinning around, like some slingshot about to let loose its bullet, and he would be gone into the alien landscape with nothing behind him.

Music-wise, maybe he would even play that record of Lou's he first picked at random—it was kind of growing on him, Jean-

Luc Ponty's Cosmic Messenger.

He would be the Cosmic Messenger then.

From Earth to whatever the alien world was, shooting across the landscape in that HEMI 'Cuda with a blaze of dust behind him.

As far as paint jobs, something that really popped on the landscape. It would have to be lime green, the sign of life on Earth—the land where in the universe all the wild things lived.

Max began to smile as the water washed over him. Picturing himself cutting circles into the landscape, over and over again, was hypnotic. Sometimes when he pictured himself in a car in his mind, it seemed more real than if he was standing in front of it. Like he was awakening something hidden inside his mind.

There he was, the drums smashing, the guitar singing, from Cosmic Messenger, while he spun around, over and over.

The last time he had experienced real heat had been when he had hidden in Death Valley a few years ago, outrunning what seemed like half the local police department in a stolen Ford Mustang SVT Cobra. He flew out into the desert with the trail of blue and red lights flashing behind him, right into a dust storm. The sand crashed about the windows as he went blindly forward as fast as he could go. He was blind, but he just started laughing as he could not see anything in front of him, and in the end he closed his eyes, because he found it hilarious, because he could not see anything anyway. The police had disappeared behind somewhere in the magic of that moment, gone, and he kept going until the storm passed and the Ford Mustang finally ran out of gas.

He walked under the sun with nothing but a blue bottle of Faygo Cotton Candy soda swinging in his hand. He had nearly died out there until he stumbled upon that small adobe house

with its beat-up blue Ford pickup outside, where the eighty-nine-year-old rail-thin woman knelt before her garden. The wind blew her grey hair around her like smoke, which was tied back with a bright purple bandana.

Her name was Diwata and she had taken him in. She exchanged his soda for water. Half Native American and half Filipino, she had made her living as a tattoo artist, traveling the world. There wasn't a country she hadn't felt the dirt within. She told him she had dreamed of him, then brought him back to life over the next week. She tattooed a soaring falcon on his back, but with a warning: he could never look at it directly, never see it with his own eyes. He could only know it through other people's descriptions. If he ever saw it directly, the falcon would land, disappear, and his protection would vanish. And his spirit would break to the four winds. Then if he did not find something to anchor his spirit to this world again, to pull it together, he would be overwhelmed and die.

When Max was getting changed into his jeans and leather jacket, Lou told him that they would do runs over the next few days, until Max was used to the routine. "It takes a bit of getting used to. Once you get the system down, I'll let you fly alone."

Max put on his combat boots. "So we don't both come out?"

"If you think about it, what the hell would two people do out here anyway? Hold each other's hands?" Lou put on a brown suede jacket and blue jeans. If Max did not know he was a criminal, he would have thought he was a cop. He had that tidy way about him. "You can only fit one forklift in there anyway. Plus, you don't send the rescue team down in the diving bell with the divers. They stay on ship.

"Right now, I'm only here because if I don't call the guy over

in the building watching the front every two hours, then he's going to walk over to the lift and pull that lever. He's our safety guard, in case we miss our trip home. Because if that happens, and no one in Detroit is pulling that lever, we're not coming home."

"I guess it makes sense."

"It's life or death is what it is."

"So the guy in the building knows about the lift?"

"He knows how to pull a lever. And make a phone call to someone who knows a bit more than him. But not much. That's the only safety net we have. It is on us to protect ourselves out there. Don't worry, kid. Soon this will all be second nature."

When Max was changed, Lou took him to the kitchen for his final task of the day. He hovered next to him in his brown suede jacket, explaining how to make coffee. It was Max's job to fill two thermos flasks of coffee and bring them out the back door to someone named Thomas, a kid, who would taxi them out to the muscle in the car out back and the building out front.

Lou explained, holding out a bag of cookies, the need to put a sandwich bag of something different with the coffee each day. Today it was six Pepperidge Farm cookies. Tomorrow it would be two pieces of cake. They always changed it up, but the coffee always stayed the same.

"We don't just do the coffee because we are the only ones with working plumbing around here. We do the coffee because it keeps the relationship between us—between these two worlds. In here, and out there. In this line of business, if you don't have some type of interaction, even at a basic level, you can become strangers really fast. So we keep this bridge between us. That's why it's important we do it, and they're not just ordering Starbucks. We do the coffee. It's important that we do it. And

we make sure we have it out the door each day.”

“My girlfriend, Natasha, says I make really good coffee.”

Lou studied him. “You don’t have to make good coffee. You have to make the coffee per the instructions above the sink. You do it like that, and they get the same every time. You give someone the same thing every time, then they get used to it.”

“I got it.”

Lou left after that, and Max brought the two thermoses of coffee out the back door—one black with no sugar, the other with sugar and cream. Both with a sandwich bag with six chocolate chip cookies inside.

Thomas was already waiting on his mountain bike, leaning over the bars with ice cream in his mouth, even though the back courtyard was filled with a soft powder of snow. His warm breath puffed out of his mouth.

The mountain bike had a wicker basket on the front which seemed out of place. Thomas seemed like he had rolled out of middle school. He had his hair in French braids and was wearing a thick black puffy jacket. He rocked back and forth on his bike while Max came down and handed the thermoses and cookies in the sandwich bags to him. Thomas placed them in the basket at the front, where they lay lopsided. He continued eating his ice cream.

It was cold outside, and Max rubbed his hands. Across the road was a 1970 forest green Chevrolet Impala parked across the street. It had gold rims and dark tinted windows and a shadowed figure inside.

“That’s the muscle, Williams.”

“Nice ride,” said Max, and he meant it. The 1970 Chevrolet Impala SS was born for customization. And he knew by looking that a lot of custom work had gone into the Impala. It was all

dressed up for the ball. It was just a pity it was sitting there, with no one to dance with.

Max could take her dancing—open up that 427 V8 engine, let those 385 horses run wild. Cut circles in the tarmac out by the old Packard Plant, where he'd taken the warden's car—that Mercedes-Benz S-Class, the cheese in the mousetrap that had gotten him caught. But he'd sure enjoyed that cheese while he was spinning round and round, alone, with no one watching, clouds of smoke rising from the tires like the ground had caught fire.

A week later, the warden was on the news. The mayor had assembled a special task force, and Max happened to be under a stolen Corvette—a classic 1967 Stingray convertible—fixing a brake line of all things, when the chop shop was raided.

When in jail, the warden asked three times to speak privately to Max. Each time, he told him if he confessed to stealing his Mercedes, he would be rewarded. Little did the warden know—probably a good thing—it was him. He had forced himself to hold back his laughter. Otherwise, he would have been serving some hard time.

“I would bring you over to introduce you to him,” said Thomas, directing to Williams. “But he don't talk to anyone that's not paying him. He says his time is money, and if someone's not cutting a check, then they're doing nothing for him. And it's not fronting. He's an old-school soldier. He one hundred percent hard. He real cold like that.

“Charlie, in the building out front, he just drives a green SUV. He's friendly though. He says he doesn't care what his car looks like, as long as it's warm and can make it through the drive-through on the way home. He's a big fella.” He paused. “Charlie said you worked at a chop shop?”

“Yeah,” said Max. “I sure did, for a time.”

“And before that you boosted cars?”

“Yeah. I did a whole lot of that.”

“In Detroit?”

“Everywhere.”

“How fast you boost a car?”

“What kind of car?”

“Bugatti.”

Max just smiled. He had never stolen a Bugatti before, but figured he could boost one in short measure, with the right prep work. With something like that, at least the late model Bugattis, it was all who you knew. It was all electronic. “About five seconds.”

“Five seconds?”

“Yeah, about that.” The problem would not be stealing a late model Bugatti, of course—it would be getting rid of it. No chop shop, or at least the chop shops Max had worked in, would touch it because a Bugatti was so loaded with anti-theft devices it was always online. Not that you would have much luck selling the parts anyway. It was not like someone with a Bugatti was searching online listings for a rear fender. However, that Impala out there across from him would be perfect. Every chop shop on the planet would take that. That was liquid money on wheels right there.

“You got a spare smoke?”

“What are you, like twelve?”

“I’m fourteen. I’m still growing.”

“You’re too young to smoke,” Max told him.

But Thomas lifted his shirt up and showed that he had a .38 stuffed in the band of his pants.

“What, you’re going to mug me for my cigarettes?”

“Nah, I’m just showing you I’m old enough to carry,” said Thomas, dropping his shirt.

“In what state?”

“What?”

“Are you old enough to carry?”

Thomas pointed around. “In this here, abandoned cold-ass state around here. Like I am old enough to smoke around here. And what you care, you talking all about boosting cars, and then you going to tell me I can’t smoke.”

“Why you eating an ice cream? It’s like zero below out here.”

“Because,” said Thomas, “Williams gave it to me. Now you going to give a man a smoke or what?”

“You a man now?”

“Yeah.”

Max gave him a smoke. Thomas had his own lighter, which was the shape of a small skull. He lit up and then sat back on his bike and smoked, blowing smoke rings in the cold air. He studied Max. “So what do you do? Run coffee back and forth?”

“Whatever the muscle wants, I go get them,” he said, flicking ash. “Mainly though, I’m just a second set of eyes at night. Harder to see at night, so it pays to have someone who can creep around.”

“That’s what you do, creep around?”

“Yeah. And get them stuff they want.”

“So you’re on nights, like me.”

“Yeah.”

“So off to catch the school bus after this, turn in your homework no doubt.”

Thomas added at length, “I’m off to practice.”

“Practice what?”

Thomas pulled up his shirt again. “I shoot down the street.

I have a place there. Then I got to go home and look after my sister while mom's at work."

"Fair enough," said Max.

"The coffee Irish?"

"What?"

"Irish, you know, got some liquor in it?"

"It's only coffee."

"Just wondering," said Thomas, "because sometimes Lou makes it Irish, if it's cold, you know."

"Well, it's coffee. Only coffee."

"That's your bike, out front?"

"That's right."

"It for sale?"

"Why, you got money?"

Thomas went into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. "Yeah, I got money."

Max pointed at his mountain bike with his cigarette. "Maybe you should get an upgrade."

"Yeah, maybe I should."

"Seven grand and you can have it."

"Seven grand," Thomas repeated. "I can get a better deal from my step dad. He has a 1989 Indian. Says he will sell to me for four."

"Well, it is a free market."

"I'd give you two for it."

"Two?"

"Yeah."

"How about, no."

"Two is about all it's worth."

"You get together four, and then we will talk."

"Not paying four, for a Honda."

“That Honda is a classic,” said Max. “A 1975 Honda Gold Wing GL1000.”

“That’s not a classic.”

Max smiled. “That’s a retro classic, right there. Get together four, and we can talk.”

Thomas thought. “You are dreaming at four,” he said, turning around and riding towards the Impala, only looking back. “I’m only paying two.”

Max sat at the kitchen table in his boxer shorts chopping vegetables for Natasha, who needed them finely diced for their vegan shepherd’s pie. Natasha was wearing her floral dress. Max loved her in that thing. She was like some young graceful beauty who should be nowhere near someone like Max. He was lucky. Always had been.

Max slowly brought his knife down on a carrot while he studied a car magazine just beyond his chopping board.

“Baby, did you know that a pumpkin is a fruit?” Natasha asked.

“I never heard that before, darling.”

“It’s scientifically defined as a fruit, because it has seeds, but in culinary terms it’s a vegetable. I read that today at the grocery store.”

“I did not know that, darling. There are so many things to learn about this world. You make me wish I stayed in school.”

“Baby, I was thinking about getting a tattoo. Maybe a falcon like the one on your back. But on my arm.”

“Like my falcon?”

“I like how the falcon is half made out of stars and the city with the skyscrapers below it. There is something about it—it’s romantic.”

Max had not heard that his falcon was made out of stars

before. Natasha had said last time it was made out of trees. But both sounded fine with him. He had never seen the tattoo himself, because Diwata, the old lady in Death Valley who had done it, said if he ever saw it he would lose its protection over him. And the falcon would leave and every danger that it had kept from him would come all at once, in an arrow, and he would die.

Maybe that was true, maybe not, but he had never looked.

“Do you think I should get a falcon tattoo?” Natasha asked.

“I think you should, darling,” said Max honestly. “Just don’t make it too big, otherwise you will make my falcon jealous.”

“Okay, baby,” she said. “Well, maybe I will start looking at a few places in town. See if I can find a good artist.” She then added she was thinking of getting it on her shoulder.

“It will look good on you, darling—everything does.”

Natasha asked him if he wanted onions. He stared at her for a moment, like someone about to commit a grave sin, and she must have read his face—he hated onions and she was trying to get him to try them—because she decided against it. “I put in an application at that pet store I told you about. I’m hoping for a call back.”

“That’s great, darling.”

“I fell in love with the puppies in there, baby, I really did.”

“They’d be crazy not to call you back.” He paused chopping the carrots, which he’d been taking his time with, when he spotted a Midnight blue 1967 Ford Mustang Fastback GT V8. The paint job seemed to leap off the page.

Natasha came over to see what he was looking at, as she always did, her hands cradling a wet potato.

“I like the pink one on the first page.”

Max scrolled back to a pink VW Beetle. “This one?”

“Yeah, I like that.”

Max studied it, the sight almost hurting his eyes. It was modern, like some 3D printer had made it out of pink bubblegum. “Darling, I love you, but that car is just not right.”

“Are you making more money at the new job than at the warehouse?”

“Same as the warehouse job,” said Max, turning back to the Ford. “But after a few months, if I’m still around, Lou said I’ll get a bump. I have to prove myself first.” He smiled greedily. “When we talked about possible numbers, he mentioned it could be as much as ten percent.”

“Oh, you’re doing so well, baby. I’m really proud of you.”

Max was proud of himself. He took out a cigarette—he deserved one. “You can tell your father he was wrong about all those things.”

“He was wrong, baby.”

Her father, the former lieutenant general, hated Max. He had taken Max aside the first time they met, during dinner a few months ago at his house in Palmer Woods. They had gone alone to the general’s shed, where he was making a pine rocking chair. “Fine wood, simple, elegant,” he had told Max. Then he had given Max his home-brewed beer, and they had stood there looking at each other while he explained to Max that he would never in a million years be welcomed into the family.

“I’ve overseen the training of thousands of men,” said the general. “I can judge what a man is, what he can become, what destiny lies before him, just by looking in his eyes. It’s a skill that has taken me a lifetime to develop. But you know what I see when I look in your eyes?”

Max shrugged.

“I see someone who does not have, in the faintest, any plans

in life. Someone who goes whichever way the wind blows. And in this world, you get eaten up without a plan. And I am not letting you take my daughter with you.” He studied Max. “It’s not personal, son. But it’s not going to happen. So I don’t consent to you seeing my daughter, just to make it clear, and you will never be welcomed into this family. It will never happen.”

If the general had been expecting begging or convincing, he didn’t really know what he was dealing with. The moment he finished, Max felt laughter rise up inside him until he could not contain it. He burst out laughing so hysterically that the bottle in his hand kept bobbing up and down, sending froth onto the floor.

Max did not know why, but he took out a cigarette and lit up, even though the general had said, “Absolutely no smoking on his property.”

Max thought he was going to take a beating then. He had no intention of fighting back, because it was Natasha’s father after all. Not that he was any good at fighting—he had only ever been a lucky thrower. The general seemed like the kind of man that knew some type of karate. He had a collection of Japanese swords in his house as well as other things. But no beating came. The general just watched him with his arms crossed.

“As I said, son, it’s never going to happen. And believe me, if you are picking a war with someone, it doesn’t want to be me.”

That evening, when Max and Natasha got home to their small apartment, with two months’ worth of rent owed, her father called Natasha and said he was cutting off the money he had been sending her. He told her she would either have to break up with Max or learn the hard way that if she wanted to survive in this world, she needed to make wise decisions, not poor ones.

She chose Max. And when she did so, looking into his eyes as

he looked into hers, with tears coming down her small freckles, she said it would always be him.

But she shook her head when she said it, telling him to please never break her heart.

“Never,” he said, and he had never meant anything more in his life. In fact, when the words came out, he could feel the falcon on his back warm, as if some truth had been burned into him in some secret way.

The new job was a lifesaver.

“I worry though, baby,” said Natasha later that night, serving up their shepherd’s pie. “If you’re working night shift, you won’t get enough sunlight. You have to get sunlight, baby. Otherwise, you won’t get enough vitamin D.”

Max smiled. He wanted to say there was no danger of that, but decided it was easier to just agree with her. She came in and showed him a postcard that had come from France.

“My cousin really likes it over there,” she said. Natasha was always talking about France. She believed she had lived in France in a past life. Max examined the postcard—the other side had the Eiffel Tower.

“That spot right there in the picture,” said Natasha as she came close beside him. He could smell the mushrooms she had been frying for the vegan shepherd’s pie—her mother’s secret ingredient. “Right there is where Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin were singing ‘Je t’aime’ in that video.”

She loved the song. She liked to play it in the background. If only Max had more money, he would like to sweep her up and take her there. Her father would not like that. But he could maybe send him a card from France. Instead of sweeping her off her feet, he thumped the postcard and studied the sparkle in her eyes as she read it back to him.

“My cousin says,” said Natasha, “it’s like another world over there. You feel like you are just in another world. It’s so different.”

Over the next few days, Max learned the routine. Under Lou’s watchful eye, he drove loads back and forth in the blazing alien sun. Sweat poured from his head, soaking through his protective gear as he unloaded barrel after barrel into the seemingly bottomless pit.

“You want to be real careful how you accelerate up that ramp,” Lou cautioned during one run. “You don’t want to go into the pit with your load. Take it real slow.”

The training continued. Max drove loads of toxic waste into the lift, from the lift to the pit, and back again, while Lou supervised. From his seat on the forklift, Max found himself studying the markings inside the sphere more closely each time he waited for the door to close. The pattern etched into his mind.

“Always set your timer,” Lou reminded him constantly.

Max wound the timer, hanging it inside the forklift before each trip. The routine was becoming familiar, but the strangeness of their destination never quite wore off. Each time he went from freezing cold to blazing hot, from the dimmer lighting of the warehouse to the blinding light.

During one run, Max’s respirator began fogging up in the intense heat, obscuring his vision as he maneuvered the forklift across the alien terrain.

“I can’t see,” he called out to Lou.

“I can’t help you with that because I’m not Jesus.” Lou watched from the ground. “Move slow, and you won’t need to see much anyway.”

Between runs, they would stand in the shadow of the refriger-

ator, drinking Cokes and playing records—all instrumental or jazz fusion. The shade offered little relief from the oppressive heat. Max found himself glancing around more and more—at the solar panels, at the sphere.

“You ever go out there?” Max finally asked, gesturing toward the cluster of mesas in the distance while Spyro Gyra’s *Morning Dance* played in the background.

“Like I said before, you would need a swimming pool on wheels,” Lou said, wiping sweat from his brow. “But even if you had that, this is our hamster wheel right here. The solar panels, I check once every six months, maybe; apart from that, it’s just around here. Mr. Benson was very clear about that.”

Max had heard a lot about Mr. Benson, but he did not know how much was true. Some stories, at least from Gordie, who had talked with him a few months ago, said Mr. Benson was a vampire. Teeth and all. Although when Gordie was saying that, he had too much to drink and was giggling like a schoolgirl. The only thing Max had heard was Mr. Benson had a reputation which went far beyond Detroit. Max had heard his name mentioned as far away as California, at least in certain circles.

“Gordie says he is a vampire,” said Max, not being able to help himself.

“My nephew says all kinds of dumb stuff,” said Lou. “He is not a vampire. But he is smart. He sees everything before it happens. And every time he makes a move, he usually gains more than he loses. That is the kind of person people want to hitch their wagon to. But beyond that, he is just a man.”

“And you have met him?”

“Twice,” said Lou. “But only for a short time. What I am telling you is from the best sources, and those are those who work for him.”

Max smiled. "So he is not a vampire."

Lou turned and gave him a bad student look, before heading back to studying the wasteland. "There was this story a long time ago. It's not true, though."

"What's not true?"

"Well, rumor has it when he arrived in town and began doing his thing, the mob didn't like it. They gave him a pair of concrete shoes and threw him off the back of a boat into the Detroit River. But then the next day, he was back. So they caught him and did it again. And the next day, he was back. So, the story goes, the next time they killed him outright, capturing the entire thing on camera—put a shotgun against his head and pulled the trigger.

"The next day, he was back. It was then they decided to leave him alone. In fact, they gave him a small part of Detroit where he could do his thing. The legend goes the boss believed Mr. Benson was a supernatural being after that, as did many others. Like I said, the story is not true, but that is where the idea about him being important came from. I guess it grew from there and he became a vampire."

"So that's not true?"

Lou studied him. "How could it be true? It would mean he was either born with a whole lot of identical twin brothers to spare, or he is a ghost or something."

"My girlfriend Natasha believes in ghosts."

"Well, he's not a ghost. He's flesh and blood. It's just if you keep making moves—and good ones—people start thinking you are more than a man. All that shows you is that we are plagued by bad leadership to such an extent that any good leadership looks supernatural."

The timer started to ring in Lou's hand. "All right, time to get back in the snow globe. Then it's time for you to fly alone.

Next trip, and from now on, you go solo.”

Max’s first solo run went as smoothly as could be expected. He went through the lift, dumped the load, came back, and then repeated the cycle. In fact, it was easier without Lou because he didn’t feel constantly micromanaged. Soon, Max was fully adjusted. After dumping his load at the pit, he’d remove his respirator mask, light a smoke, and walk to the fridge for a Coke. The cold bottle felt like salvation against his skin as he held it against his head.

At the end of his shift, Max walked into the changing room with a towel around him. Lou was already dressed, applying deodorant.

“When you bring the coffee out to them, empty that trash bin in here as well,” Lou said, closing his locker. “Other than that, I will see you tomorrow.”

After Lou left, Max made the coffee and headed out the back door with the bin from the changing room. He wedged the door open with a brick, then saw Thomas biking toward him, coming to a skid just before the steps. The Impala with dark-tinted windows and gold rims was now parked at the corner of an intersection behind a boarded-up building, its hood poking out like the nose of a green shark.

Max left the thermoses on the steps and went to the snow-covered dumpster, lifted the lid, and emptied the trash bin from the changing rooms into the dumpster. A crumpled Chinese takeaway menu fell out into the dumpster. He retrieved it, smoothing out the paper to study the drawing more carefully.

Thomas arrived and collected the thermos in the basket of his mountain bike. “There’s no cookies this time?”

Max came back to the wall before the steps, placing down the now-empty bin and examining the menu.

“What about the cookies?”

“What?”

“You forgot the cookies. Those are the first thing they eat. They are all about those cookies. It’s like what Charlie and Williams wait for.”

Max searched his pocket and took out the two sandwich bags and handed them to Thomas, who took them.

Max studied the menu. The diagram of circles and squares matched their work site perfectly, with solar panels and spheres. A line extended in the direction of the mesas, marked “three miles.” But it didn’t run from the sphere that Max had walked out of—it extended from the other sphere behind the solar panels, half-submerged in the ground a hundred feet or more away.

A rough map to something out in the direction of the mesas.

All that was out here, as far as Max could tell, was death. It was so hot that any person who went half a mile, let alone three, would likely fall over. Like Lou said, you would need a swimming pool on wheels.

A hundred and sixty degrees in the shade. By the time anyone got three miles out, they would look like a Thanksgiving turkey.

“Got a smoke?” Thomas asked.

Max glanced up. “You’re too young to smoke.”

“You gave me a smoke last time.”

“That was a one-off,” he said, looking back at the menu. “Plus, what would your mother say if she found out I was handing you out smokes.”

“Ling used to buy me smokes,” said Thomas.

“Ling?”

“That’s from the restaurant Ling lives above.”

“Who is Ling?”

But now Thomas beckoned for a smoke. Max gave him one.

“Ling worked here. He’s gone though.”

“He did the job I do?”

“I don’t know what job you do. But he worked with Lou, like you do.”

Max held out the menu. “And this menu is for the restaurant he lived above?”

“Yeah. Where’d you get that anyway?”

“Found it inside,” said Max truthfully. He studied the menu again with new eyes. If Ling had headed out in the direction of the mesas, then Max had a fair idea what happened to him.

“You give me your pack of smokes, and I’ll tell you something no one else knows.”

“What?”

“Just give me your packet. I’ll tell you something no one knows.”

“The entire packet? It’s almost full.”

“Yeah, but you’re on your way home. You can buy some more.”

“Something no one else knows?”

“To do with Ling.”

“How do I know it’s worth it?”

“If I want to get smokes off you in the future, why would I steer you wrong?”

Max took out two smokes, which he said were for the ride home, before handing him the rest of the packet.

Thomas inspected them, and only when he was happy did he put them away and come a bit closer. “Somewhere around Detroit, he found some gold. Like a lot of gold. He found it in some cave.”

Now Max was interested. Because the only caves he knew about—since there were none in Detroit—were the caves where

Ling would have been working, caves that just so happened to be in the direction of the rough line on the Chinese menu he had been looking at. “In a cave?”

“Yeah, he found gold in a cave. He told me about it. He wouldn’t tell me where in Detroit the cave was. But he said he found gold in a cave. He even showed it to me.”

“How much gold?”

“He didn’t say. But he wanted me to help him and this other person collect it. He said he would tell me when, but I had to keep it secret. Then he just went missing. That was like a month ago.”

“He wanted you to help him collect gold from a cave?”

“Yeah, he said he would need an extra pair of hands because we had to be fast about it.” Thomas paused. “He said we would be riding a motorbike. I even got a dirt bike a month back. But the engine has something wrong with it, so I’m not riding it at the moment.”

Max watched him. “He show you any gold?”

“Yeah, he gave me a nugget. But he said I had to keep it secret. But now with him disappearing and stuff, I figure it doesn’t matter. I think maybe he told the wrong person, and then someone put a burner against the back of his head and told him to show them that cave. You speak about that type of stuff to the wrong person, that’s what happens.”

“So you’ve seen the gold?”

“Yeah,” said Thomas. “But my mom took it off me. She won’t give it back.”

But now the headlights of the Impala flashed in their direction. It was Williams.

“I got to go. He wants his coffee.”

3

CHAPTER 3

Max ordered the Kung Pao chicken, a double portion of fried rice, and two pork balls—whatever they were. Natasha did not like Chinese food, but she would eat the fried rice with something she made at home. She was on some type of vegetarian kick, and Max wanted to get his meat in before he joined her.

The restaurant was nearly empty, having just opened when Max arrived. He had been waiting for it to open while he cased Ling's apartment above, watching, going to the back and looking at what cars were parked there. He was seeing if he could spot anyone moving behind one of the heavy-curtained windows in the apartment above. So far, nothing.

He finished his Kung Pao chicken while he conducted his surveillance, wondering if he should even approach the apartment. It had only been a month or so since Ling went missing. The only sign that someone had lived in the apartment was that the analog power meter was still ticking along slowly, so at least the fridge was still running.

He thought about continuing to watch the building, but soon

he found himself at the fire escape in the alleyway to the side. The ladder came down easily when he jumped and caught it, rolling down like it was made for him. Then he ran up the fire escape to the second floor and used a bump key to open the lock. It took a few tries because the lock was stiff—which was a good sign: it hadn't been used in a while.

Maybe because Ling was secretive and no one knew where he lived, or so Thomas had told him. Or maybe no one had even reported him missing yet. He did work for a criminal cartel, after all—they were not exactly prone to calling the police.

Especially if they were the ones that put one behind his ear.

Max pushed the door open and did not have to search long to at least conclude the place was Ling's. A framed photograph on the wall depicted a desert mesa. Ling's mind seemed preoccupied with work.

Max checked the house: a simple kitchen with a stack of washed dishes; a bowl of cat food gone, most likely the cat as well; tidy, everything in plastic boxes and clean; a shared living room and bedroom with nothing in them but a TV and coffee table. The place did not look like it had been tossed, although if it had, it had been done by someone who put everything back the way it was. There was a month's worth of dust on everything.

Max did find out more about Ling through his medicine cabinet, though, which confirmed what Thomas had said about insomnia. The entire cabinet was stacked with sleeping pills which, according to a quick search on Max's phone, were some of the most powerful kind you could get. All were prescribed to a Mr. Ling Chen. But Ling hadn't stopped there—he'd even gone off-market for some heavy-duty tranquilizers, one of which Max recognized: Xylazine. What kind of sleep issues

one would need to have to take those, he didn't know, but it must have been some high-level insomnia.

Pills could be worth money, especially tranquilizers like Xylazine, so Max went to the bedroom and found a backpack. He filled it with everything from the medicine cabinet, both the medications he recognized and those he didn't.

After about an hour inside, he'd gone through the apartment thoroughly, even dumping out food from cereal boxes to see if anything was hidden inside. He stood in the living room, surveying the fine mess he'd made. It wasn't until his eyes landed on *The Godfather* poster on the wall that he realized he had one last place to check.

He had only seen a few movies in his entire life, but he had hundreds of them explained to him in detail during the two years he was in jail by Gordie, his cellmate. Gordie watched everything and loved *The Godfather*. He had explained the best scenes in detail to Max, including the one where Michael Corleone had hidden the gun he used to shoot Captain McCluskey. In that scene at Louis' Restaurant, Michael Corleone had hidden the gun behind the toilet tank. And as Max rose slowly, walked to the bathroom, and checked the toilet, the only difference was he found what he was looking for inside the toilet tank rather than behind it: a Christmas-themed cake tin sealed in a plastic bag.

Max pulled it out, set the lid down on the toilet, and removed the box. After a second's hesitation, he opened it. Inside were six gold ingots, each the size of a thumbnail and only a quarter of an inch thick, and a generic-brand cellphone. They were not gold nuggets like Thomas had talked about, and Max guessed that Ling had smelted the nuggets down and turned them into ingots himself, as they lacked any hallmark or serial number.

Max removed a small ingot and studied it. It didn't look fake—the weight and everything else about it seemed right. And if there were miniature ingots cast from gold nuggets, then maybe Thomas was right about the cave.

A cave full of gold. And it could only be in one place. But it would not be easy to get to. In fact, just trying to get to it in that heat could no doubt kill you. Strangely, the thought made Max smile. He stepped back and examined the ingot in the light.

Max held one up to the light from the window above. It glittered. He pocketed the ingots, took out the cellphone, and tried to turn it on, but the battery was dead. Back in the living room, he found a charger, plugged it in, and powered up the phone. He'd expected to encounter a passcode, but there was none. Maybe because Ling had no intention of it leaving the house, being a burner phone.

The moment the phone connected to its network, it began buzzing continuously as delayed messages flooded in. In the text messages, he found dozens that had been sent over the course of six months from a single person. Someone who was not listed in the contacts but was referred to in text messages only at one point as Akando—apparently some type of childhood friend. Max searched the name Akando on his own phone. It was Native American, specifically Sioux. But that was about all. He could not find out any other information, and no one named Akando.

He would have to ask Natasha to search for him—she was better at that kind of thing.

He was only just figuring out how to upload pictures of cars he liked to Facebook.

The exchange on Ling's phone went back and forth, discussing the cave and the gold within it and the best way to

extract the gold. Apparently, the deeper you went into the cave, the larger the pieces of gold became. The gold was inlaid on the sides of the cave in some decorative fashion.

A cave full of gold. They were just wrestling back and forth about the best way to get it. But the problem was, Ling would not tell Akando where it was. Although he told him everything else: the heat, the flat wasteland, and the fact they only had forty minutes. At first, Akando did not understand the constraints but accepted them, as well as the fact Ling would not tell him the location of the mesas where the cave was. However, at one point, Ling had shown Akando GoPro footage taken from a bicycle, from the lift, all the way to the cave entrance. Ling was so overheated when he got to the cave, he could barely function. They did not talk about the details the footage had recorded, beyond Akando saying something inside seemed like some type of modern art installation—saying it resembled a golden trumpet—whatever that meant.

However, what Akando had seen on the footage made him more eager to do what they had planned sooner rather than later. Then the exchange was reduced to an argument about Ling saying they had to be careful, they had to plan and streamline their approach because it was dangerous where it was located, and get all the gear needed—including heat-resistant suits, dirt bikes, and other things—while Akando said they needed to go now, for the very reasons it was dangerous to wait.

The exchange was over mid-conversation, and no one had sent each other a message in one month. This was a bad sign—usually, you would expect another message from one of the parties asking where the other was. But in this case, it seemed to just stop one day.

So there was GoPro footage taken from a bicycle of Ling riding out to the caves. If Max could get hold of the footage, that would tell him exactly which cave he needed to go to. It was not that there was a risk of death that worried Max—in fact, that excited him and made his heart race. He had no problem rolling the dice and seeing if he came out whole on the other side—the problem was finding it would be slow. It might take years.

He wondered if he could even take the slow process of going to one cave at a time because that was all the time he had in the forty minutes before the lift returned. He guessed that if you could survive the ride to the mesas, there and back, you could go to one at a time. Of course, it had to be within the closest clusters of mesas. But since they all seemed the same distance, they were all around three miles away.

Going slow was the worst. He wondered if he would even be able to sleep at night. Maybe he would get the same disease as Ling.

He needed to get hold of the video. He scrolled through the messages again, looking for any details, any leads to tell him who Akando was. That's when Max saw the only detail he could find that might be something: Akando was replying to Ling, saying he would be late for their meet because he was currently held up at the firehouse.

Max did not know if this meant Akando worked for the fire department, but it was the only lead he had.

There was an elephant in the room, though: the question of whether Akando was still alive. The messages had cut off rather abruptly. Determining whether Akando—and Ling—were still breathing was crucial. This detail would reveal whether there were other players involved. If Akando and Ling were no longer

alive, it would suggest Mr. Benson was keeping a close and lethal watch on anyone who worked for him.

Max exited the bathroom and came to the window smiling—something very interesting about the fact that maybe people were watching.

Three miles on a bicycle in heat that was 160 degrees in the shade. A cave of gold with gold ingots that grew larger as you went on.

Max felt that old feeling rising in him, the same one he got when boosting cars with the police on his tail. As he stood in the apartment, it made him smile. He took out a cigarette, lit it, and looked around.

If he got the gold, he could only imagine the look on Natasha's face when he said they were not only going to France but going to live there.

The world would be theirs.

It was a long shot, one Max did not know would pay off, but he started at the fire station on Mt. Elliott Street. However, he had no luck whatsoever as no one knew anyone named Akando.

"He's Native American," Max said, standing outside and checking out the fire engine at the same time. "How much horsepower?"

"Six hundred."

"How fast can it go?"

"About 90," said the fireman.

Soon, Max was on his hands trying to inspect the tires.

"Look," said the fireman. "I don't know any Akando."

"You sure?"

"I've never heard of anyone named Akando."

"He's Native American," said Max, kicking a tire. He had once been inside a racing truck, but he had never been behind the

wheel. It was at the Michigan Speedway.

“Look, I don’t know anyone named that. And you are going to have to remove your bike—you can’t park it out there. If we need to get out, it will be in the way.”

“You do ride-alongs?”

“No we don’t,” said the fireman.

At the next fire station, Max saw an old face he had not seen in years. But the fireman did not recognize Max, which was probably a good thing.

The fire station’s front door was open. Max came inside, and there he was, looping hose. The fireman resembled the same comic book superhero he had been fifteen years ago, apart from shots of gray in his hair, when Max had rolled a stolen sun-yellow 2005 Ford Mustang on the Chrysler Freeway. Back then, he had told Max—who was sitting at the side of the road waiting for an ambulance, although the only scratch he had was on his arm—that Max was what was wrong with this world. If he weren’t in uniform, he would take Max behind the tow truck and beat the life out of him. He could have killed someone.

Max had thought about pushing the fireman then, because that is usually how it went, and the day either got worse or nothing happened. But on the other side of the highway, around the accident scene, was a 1990 Chevrolet Camaro IROC Z28. It was jet black with red stripes down the side and rear window louvers. Sleek, beautiful, like something out of a time machine.

He could not believe it.

Max told the fireman about Akando and how he was an old friend trying to track him down. But the fireman told Max that he did not know anyone named Akando.

“Can’t say it rings a bell,” he said, finishing looping his hose.

A firewoman came up behind, and they began talking about the name Akando. The woman had two cups of coffee and told Max to hold on. She disappeared for a while while Max asked if he could have a look underneath.

“I guess,” said the fireman.

Max laid on his back and examined the well-maintained chassis of the fire engine. He had never been a fan of trucks—he liked his cars more, but he could not help wondering what the fire truck would look like stripped down to its bare motor and wheels. It would tear up any speedway something special.

The woman came back, and Max crawled out and looked up at her with a wide smile. She had a strange expression on her face but then just told him there was no one named Akando anywhere in the Detroit fire department.

He needed to see that GoPro footage. But he could not do that without finding the only other person who had seen it, Akando.

At home, Natasha prepared the vegan chicken with flour and other spices. After which it had to rest for half an hour while they both worked on the salad. Max was being neat and tidy, because Natasha liked that, by laying down newspaper on the kitchen table before he started chopping up tomatoes and cucumber for their salad.

Max did not know if he really wanted to learn how to cook French food, and to be honest, he was not sure what the difference was. But he knew he wanted to have Natasha teach him. He liked the way she came close to him and slowly walked them both through what to do.

She was smart and made hard things look easy. He wondered if he was smart at anything that did not involve an engine.

While they ate their vegan Cordon Bleu, which was better

than Max expected, Natasha showed him something funny that her friend had sent her—it was a cat riding a robot vacuum cleaner—when he decided he would just text Akando from Ling’s phone. He would need to throw out a line.

He did not like the idea because he wanted to know a lot more about Akando before he made contact. But things would move too slowly otherwise. He could not do anything until he knew which cave was the one with what they referred to as a golden trumpet inside. Whatever that was. But it was decorated in gold ingots.

As Natasha showed Max another video, this one of a baby hippo being bathed—“He is so cute, baby, just adorable”—Max decided to go against his better judgment and send a message to Akando from Ling’s phone, asking about a possible meet-up. He kept it short, so whoever was on the other end could not read too much into it, assuming they even still had the phone.

If he could set up a meeting, he could watch to see who showed up and, from there, start the process of finding out who he was dealing with. It was always a risk, though, because if he did it this way, he wouldn’t even know if he himself was being watched.

“Baby, I wish I worked as a zookeeper. I would love taking care of the baby hippos. They make my heart melt.”

Max looked at her phone as she showed him again and smiled. A zookeeper was spraying water into the baby hippo’s mouth, which was hopping about in ecstasy.

“He’s so cute,” said Natasha.

Back in the alien world, and with no reply from Akando, he pulled the telescope from inside his coveralls. He had collected a sheet of lead, which he rolled around it, making a small case. When he removed it and inspected it for damage in the

sweltering sun, he thought the glass would have fallen apart—it was his first test of using lead. The glass was fine.

Max walked out beyond the canopy, but when he peered through the telescope, it was hard to see the caves through the heat waves. Even through the telescope, all he could see were the black forms around the base of the cluster of mesas closest to him.

There were no real details, and he didn't know if a more powerful telescope would make any difference. The heat waves blurred everything. He could see what he guessed were the forms of caves pitting the bottom of all the mesas, but nothing with any clarity.

Not that seeing them clearly would make any difference—he could tell through the telescope thousands of caves existed between the four massive mesas. He could see enough to make out the small pitted dots around their base Lou had talked about.

If he ever made it out there, he had no way to find the cave with the gold. He would die long before that.

He drank another Coke and decided to check behind the sphere at the end of the line of solar panels. It was the only place Ling's bicycle might be, if it was even there—it had to be somewhere convenient. The heat pushed against him, unrelenting, as he stepped out of the canopy's shade.

He made it a hundred feet to the solar panels and then another twenty feet to the sphere. By the time he reached the sphere's mouth, which faced away from the worksite, he ducked inside just to escape the heat briefly. He bent down to catch his breath. It was more an act of survival than anything else. But even in the shade, he was roasting.

The sphere's mouth was partly open and half-submerged in dry dirt, as if the ground had once been mud. The patterns

inside were noticeably different from the lift. Though the mouth was the same size, and apart from being partially sunken, the patterns weren't deep claw marks like some beast had been trapped inside, as with the lift. Instead, they were a series of small inward triangular indentations combined with small ribbed bubbles.

He stepped out, the heat hitting him again, and walked around the sphere where he found something covered in a space blanket and beneath another reflective sheet. He knew it was the bicycle before he unwrapped it. Underneath was the reason why Ling had made it to the cave. It was an electric bicycle sitting on a set of ceramic bath tiles. Ling had also tapped into the solar panels to recharge it. But the battery had caught fire at some stage and had a hole in it. He had seen videos of lithium batteries catching fire online before, but this didn't seem like something burning out of control—just a burn mark around one end, slightly melted.

He tried to turn it on, but not only was nothing working, the front tire was flat.

A bike bag hung just under the seat, and with now-sweating hands inside his gloves, he unzipped it. Inside was a .38 with a green tactical grip. The chamber was loaded with bullets. He pointed the gun out to the desert and, since no one was around—maybe on the entire planet—he pulled the trigger, but nothing happened.

Maybe the .38 had something wrong with it. But he pointed again, kept pulling that trigger, and the chamber kept turning over, but no bullets were firing.

Nothing else in the bike bag.

Ling must have been alive to bring it back from whatever journey he'd taken out there, searching caves, collecting gold,

planning their raid. Maybe that meant Ling had disappeared on the Detroit side. If true, maybe Lou had found out. It would have only taken a phone call for some muscle outside to ask Ling to take a ride to that place you don't come back from. However, given the amount of medication Ling was on—for sleep, depression, anxiety, and whatever else God could throw at someone—he could have also taken another way out, the good old-fashioned rest-in-peace pill. Or maybe he fell off the earth. It happened. People disappeared sometimes: walk into the forest with a sore stomach, lie down, and not wake up; go swimming after a few too many drinks, breathe in a bit too much water, and sink. It happened more often than people thought.

Max turned to face the mesas and used his telescope again. But he got no clearer view than he did under the canopy. The cave in question, the one with the gold in it, could be hidden in any one of them. In the heat—a dangerous heat that slowed everything you wanted to do—it could take years to just search the closest mesas.

Max disliked waiting. It was something that made it hard to sleep. He liked the feeling of seeing something he wanted and trying to take it. Mostly, that was cars. But now it was something else.

He always felt better when he boosted a car. Always. It was like a cure-all. Driving fast as hell in something you did not own, chased by someone whose job it was to catch you, and outrunning them.

Max was overheated and knew he needed to cool down, but he was not looking forward to walking back. He wanted to hide in the sphere and cook like a good turkey.

But he went back. Natasha had pleaded with him to watch

some show on Bravo called the Bird Doctor or something, which she said would convince him that they should get a parrot—a Hyacinth Macaw.

When he came back to the worksite, he found himself lost in thought as he wondered about the mesas and returned to the forklift without paying proper attention. Instead of bringing the last drums to the pit, he jerked backward—one of the drums fell off. He then pressed his foot down on the wrong pedal and advanced quickly, and one of the forks pushed the loose drum onto the platform. Metal screamed against metal, and when he reversed, he saw the puncture.

Crystal-clear liquid poured out into the scorching air.

He came down and examined the liquid. It seemed like it was water, as if the drum was not even filled with toxic waste. He watched it flow for a moment, unsure what to do, but now the timer was going off, telling him it was time to go. His ride was about to leave. He came to the barrel, and trying not to catch the liquid on him, he pushed it until he had it on its side and was turning it towards the pit, rolling it inside. It sunk down into the black darkness.

Later in the shower room, steam filled the air between the metal stalls as Max and Lou cleaned up after their shift. Max couldn't stop thinking about what was in the drums. It didn't look like toxic waste to him, but then again, he'd never seen toxic waste before. Either way, he'd been wearing his face mask and gloves. None of it had gotten on him. All that had happened was the liquid had poured out onto the soil, which was now dry. Just to be on the safe side, he would take a shovel to that dirt where it had spilled and dump it into the pit as well.

After his shift, as Lou left, Max brought the coffee thermos out for Thomas, careful not to slip on the icy steps. Thomas

was across the road, talking to a thin crack in the window of the Impala, handing him something. Thomas started riding over to Max, who was breathing in the cold air.

“He wanted me to get him two sweepstakes tickets,” said Thomas as he rode up, putting his feet out on both sides to stop.

“Well, there it is,” Max pointed at the two thermoses on the steps.

Thomas picked up the two thermoses and put them in his basket.

“You got a smoke?”

Max handed him one, and they both lit up. “You carry a .38, right?”

“Yeah,” said Thomas. He pulled his shirt up slightly to show Max again and then dropped it. “Charlie, the muscle in the building at the front, gave it to me. Said I got to practice how to use it, though. I’ve been shooting for half an hour down by the water tower after work.”

Max knew where the water tower was—it was a few blocks down. “You shoot down there?”

“Just over by that water tower. There’s a basement in the building beside it. You go right down, and you can shoot there, and no one can hear anything. Not that it matters—no one cares around here anyway.”

“When do you go?”

“After this.”

Max followed Thomas on his motorcycle to the abandoned building near the water tower. Dead grass surrounded the structure as they made their way inside, Thomas pushing his bike alongside them. They descended the stairs into a damp basement where a couch and small stool sat amid slowly rusting

tools. Thomas switched on a heavy flashlight, illuminating a spray-painted circle target on the far wall.

He told Max he had only one pair of earmuffs but insisted Max take them since he'd already bought himself some earplugs. Max slipped the earmuffs on, feeling the familiar cushioned pressure around his ears.

"I shoot at the wall," Thomas explained.

Max drew his .38 and aimed at the wall. He pulled the trigger—nothing happened. Opening the gun, he checked the chamber. All the bullets were still there. He tried firing again with the same result.

"Something wrong with your gun," Thomas observed.

"Hand me a couple of rounds."

Thomas hesitated, then passed over some bullets. Max emptied the chamber and loaded the new bullets into his .38 and aimed at the target. This time, when he pulled the trigger, the gun fired perfectly. He shot again.

"You a good shot," Thomas said, impressed.

"Yeah, I'm not bad." Max was surprised—he had not shot much, but it seemed to come naturally. Maybe he was just lucky—he always seemed to be lucky with things he put his mind to.

"Must have been the bullets, not the gun," Thomas added. "Being the reason it was not firing."

"It looks that way," Max said, expelling the shell casings. His eyes stayed fixed on the wall. He pulled the trigger again, fired, again, and again.

It was the bullets, all right. Something must have happened to them when they came through the lift. Just like it had affected the glass, it must have affected the gunpowder.

But why would someone need a gun in that alien land? Unless

there was something else out there. Something he was unaware of. In all his time in that world, he had seen no signs of life, so what was it?

Max reloaded and fired. Another bullseye.

"You going to buy me a pack of smokes for all them bullets you using as well? Charlie only gives me so many a week to practice with."

"You know, smoking is a bad habit."

"Yeah, so is boosting cars."

Max smiled greedily. He was right, of course. He aimed and fired again.

"I got a guy," said Thomas. "He says he will give me his bike for two."

"Yeah," said Max. "It's a mountain bike."

"No, it's a real motorcycle, like yours," said Thomas. "But it's faster. It's a 1985 Ducati. He even let me ride it around the parking lot on the weekend, out the back of the firehouse."

Max waited. "What did you say?"

"I said he wants to sell me his 1985 Ducati."

"After that?"

"I said he let me ride it out the back of the firehouse."

"He works for the fire department?"

"No," said Thomas. "The firehouse, that is a bar. It's only small."

"And that is a bar?"

"Yeah, and he is going to sell me his Ducati for two."

"You ever heard of anyone called Akando?"

Thomas shook his head. "Who's that?"

"Where is this bar?"

"Corktown."

4

CHAPTER 4

Max parked his motorcycle outside The Fire House. It was a small bar that, given it was still early morning when he arrived, was just opening. He asked the middle-aged woman with a red bandana, who was setting out the breakfast menu, for a beer and decided to sit for a while, watching the sports on the TV above as he tried to find a natural inroad to ask about Akando.

Max wondered why the bar was called The Fire House and asked. The woman told him it was because they had five fireplaces going in the winter.

“I found a wallet with someone’s name—Akando,” he said.

The woman smiled. “Give me a break,” she said. “You a journalist or something?”

She walked to the other end of the bar and came back with a newspaper. She placed it on the bar top. On the front page of The Detroit Sentinel was a photo of a thin, rosy man with long hair standing in court in a suit and tie. The headline read: Dirty Cop Faces Fifteen Years. The story was about a former Detroit narcotics officer being sentenced for extortion, drug smuggling, and money laundering. But the cop’s name was John Cullen.

There was no mention of Akando.

“That’s what they call him on the street,” the woman said. “The journalist just never connected that. He was raised on the Pine Creek Reservation after his mother shacked up with someone down there when he was a kid. The name stuck, in some circles. On the street he goes by the name he was given as a white boy being raised out at Pine Creek—Akando.”

Max thanked her and left. He sat on his motorcycle under the shadow of a railway bridge and pulled out Ling’s phone and thought about tossing it for a moment before a little voice inside him said that would be pouring water on the fun. Knowing what he now knew, it was insane to keep it. But then again, maybe he was a little insane. At least, just enough to keep life interesting. He decided to keep the phone. But he was not sure if Akando ever replied—if he would reply back, maybe that would be a step too far. Maybe.

But as he thought about it, it almost made him laugh.

It really felt like he was skating on thin ice now.

If he got caught talking to a cop, he’d be the next to disappear—just like Ling. Maybe that’s what had already happened to Ling.

It didn’t matter that Akando was some type of childhood friend—their two worlds could never mix. It was like a match and gasoline. Out of all the people Akando could have been, he had to be a cop. Then again, he wasn’t really a cop anymore. He was a criminal. Not that it would matter to Mr. Benson.

Maybe Akando no longer had the phone he had been texting Ling from or was not replying for a good reason. He was about to be sentenced in a few days.

Three times over the next few days, he had seen the same green SUV with the gold rims: a Latino woman in a thick jacket and French braids behind the wheel. He was starting to think

maybe what happened to Ling or Akando was about to happen to him. It was not easy trying to go unnoticed on a motorcycle. You tended to stand out. The SUV also seemed to be the same one, although it was only a faint memory, that Max believed he saw when he was doing Mr. Benson's pond in Indian Village. The woman as well.

Maybe she was following Max, maybe not. But he decided to cross back across the street and went into a pawn shop where he peered out between the barred windows, through an array of display guitars before him, and at the restaurant. He felt like putting a banana in her tailpipe as a dare to himself, since Natasha had packed one for his lunch, but he didn't. Maybe now that he was getting older, he was more in control.

Maybe that is what they called growing up. The principal at his elementary school, from what little elementary school he attended—because most schools he was expelled from—had sat him down once, both hands on his shoulders, looked him in the eye, and said if he could learn to sit still for ten minutes, it would be the start of growing up. That soon he would be able to sit for twenty minutes, then thirty; then he would find the entire world open up to him.

Max had sat for two minutes before something in his mind kept telling him he needed to jump onto his desk and a few minutes later, the compulsion was too much—he jumped onto the desk and got expelled again.

"Do you need any help?"

"What?" asked Max, turning.

"Do you need any help?" the old woman asked. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

Max took in the pawn shop for the first time—they had everything, including the largest collection of vacuum cleaners

he'd seen in a while. A hedge of golf clubs sat beside him. The woman kept staring at him, and then he saw the sign above the counter: "We Buy Gold and Silver."

The woman just stared at him like he was a bug. He glanced back at the gas station and realized that he still hadn't had anyone examine the nuggets to see what karat they were. Behind the counter, they had a beautiful collection of small model cars.

"You take gold?"

"We do, gold and silver, like the sign says. If you want to come up to the counter, I can get someone to look at what you have."

While they checked four of the ingots, Max stood at the counter studying the classic car collection behind the glass. Large ten- to fourteen-inch models stretched in a single row from one end to the other. The rows below displayed model airplanes and other vehicles.

His father had bought him his first toy car when he was five years old. That old drunk had bought it for Christmas but, after a quarter bottle of whiskey, got it out of the closet, unwrapped it, and gave it to Max. It was a white 1974 Pontiac GTO with brown racing stripes down the sides, which his father called "The Great One." When he said it, his father's eyes lit up, as if he had just said something magical. His father walked Max out the back door to where the forest was.

He told Max that if he could make it to the water tower on the other side of the forest without his father catching him, then the car would be Max's. His father counted down, and Max began running with his small legs across the backyard.

Looking back, he saw his father chasing him with hands like claws, like a monster. He ran through the fence and into the forest. He kept running with his small legs until he saw the light

on the other end of the forest and the railway line. The train was almost there, but he ran across the track, tripping over, the horn of the train sounding, as he saw his father lost behind. He pulled himself up and kept running as the train rushed past an inch from him.

Now he had a clear view of the water tower, and he ran toward it, the GTO in his hands. Behind him, he turned to see the train cars still humming past. But when they stopped, his father was there with an empty look on his face. Max ran down the hill, and his father did not even give chase anymore but walked slowly down the hill toward Max, who was now victorious at the water tower. When his father came to Max, he just knelt down, picked him up, and held him up in victory. Right then, Max was the champion of the world, and his father turned him around while he laughed at the sky.

His father disappeared before that Christmas arrived. He got on a bus, or so it was said, and never returned. His mother said he was dead, but when Max turned ten years old, he got a birthday card that smelled of whiskey with a picture of a real Pontiac GTO in it. It was fire-engine red, and his father was standing beside it with a young blond woman in a bikini he had his arms around, both saluting with a bottle of beer in their free hands. He never heard from his father again. He might be dead; he might be alive, but whatever he was, he was a ghost in the rearview.

Max gazed at the display cabinet. A gold-painted 1972 Chevrolet Chevelle SS caught his eye. They sure didn't make them like that anymore.

Someone tapped the counter, and Max looked up to find an old man with a name tag that said "Aleski," who had taken his nuggets away to examine. He was short, with a flat cap, a gray

mustache, and a Greek accent. His soft blue eyes squinted at Max as he directed him to another window.

“Down here,” Aleski said softly. “They are all 24 karat,” he said at the window. “Four thousand, four hundred, cash. Or we can do six thousand in store credit. Or half and half.”

“So it’s 24 karat?”

“It is 24 karat. Cash or credit?”

Max knew the price of gold—he’d been studying it ever since finding the nuggets in Ling’s apartment. He’d even started watching gold-themed reality programs like *Gold Rush*. But perhaps a part of him wanted someone else to confirm it: here was real gold, and here was real money. And that had just happened.

“I’ll do half and half. Credit and cash.” Max then said he wanted the Chevrolet Chevelle.

Aleski called to someone else to help and simply left. “All right, Ken will write you up and sort out credit.”

Ken, a large man wearing a name tag, unlocked the display case from behind and carefully removed the Chevrolet Chevelle SS, placing it in a box. As he did so, Max noticed the jewelry display and decided to get something for Natasha. He spotted a necklace she might like and a small bracelet. Ken asked for ID, which Max provided.

Ken typed into a computer and informed Max he still had two thousand in store credit, so Max searched around for something else. That’s when he saw the women’s snakeskin jacket. Perfect for Natasha. Lime green, with a real wild edge to it. It was coming with him, of course—it had to. He asked Ken about where he might be able to buy a parrot because Natasha wanted one.

“I don’t know,” said Ken. “But not here anyway.”

He might have to do a little bit of research on the parrot, he guessed. He felt guilty now that the parrot was on his mind, so he went back to the jewelry cabinet and got Natasha some more things. And also a hat because she liked hats. He had seventeen hundred in store credit left.

He was good at spending money—made for it. When he returned with all that gold from the cave, he'd already decided he and Natasha would make a week of just spending, not worrying. He wouldn't blow much of it, maybe ten percent on a crazy budget. They could sell off the gold in Vegas, going from pawn shop to pawn shop. In Vegas, no one would probably even notice the difference. Then some blackjack, fly out to Mexico, and from there to France—because that would make Natasha happy.

As Max studied the model cars again, with Ken watching from the counter, his gaze drifted to the guns on the wall behind the counter. Every pawn shop had guns, but what caught his attention was a small collection of air guns beside the .45 and Glock.

"Those air guns up there, they don't use gunpowder?" Max inquired, pointing to an air pistol.

"They just use compressed air," Ken replied dryly, glancing at the lock.

"What's the most powerful one?"

Ken moved down to open the display case, removing a large gun and placing it on the counter. "That one is a Huben GK1. It's what they call a Pre-Charged Pneumatic air pistol. It has similar firepower to a .22 caliber. It fires with high air pressure. You probably would want an electric pump to get the right air pressure in it. But we sell those as well."

"And it's powerful?"

“A slug from it will go through about four inches of pine board, if that’s what you’re asking, at about thirty feet.”

“I’ll take it. Wrap it up with the rest.”

“You got it.” Ken began wrapping everything up. Max still had a few hundred left but figured he could hold onto it. Maybe he’d come back with Natasha and let her pick something else out.

“You want the jewelry gift-wrapped?” Ken asked.

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

Just then, a large Italian man—six-foot-five or more—waddled into line beside Max. Max didn’t recognize him, but the man clearly knew Max.

“Max, the motorcycle kid.”

Max turned around.

“I’m Charlie, your eyes across the street during the day, with that thing we do, just when you’re getting off.” Charlie grinned. “You know the thing. About the time I come on, I see you leaving.”

Max reached out and shook his hand, which felt like a baseball glove. “Word of advice, for someone younger,” Charlie continued. “Don’t get married to a woman that can’t make up her mind. My wife tells me this morning she wants a divorce again. Then at lunchtime, she says she loves me. I tell you, twenty years of it does your head in. I don’t know if I’m coming or going.”

Max smiled. “Yeah, I can understand that.”

“What type of motorcycle is that you have anyway? The one you ride to work?”

“1975 Honda Gold Wing.” Max smiled. “Went to buy it, and the guy collected falcons. Like anything that had a falcon on it. Beer glasses, you know, baseball cards. Anything. I told him I

had a falcon tattoo on my back and we were birds of a feather. And he gave it to me for fifteen hundred. He wanted two.”

“That’s a wheeler and dealer right here,” Charlie said. “I need to sell or buy something, I know who to come to. Five hundred off, that is nothing to sneeze at. And I like that line he says, what did he say, birds of a feather. This guy, he has a sense of humor. I like that.”

“They made a million of those bikes,” Ken interjected. “Easy to get parts.”

“That’s good thinking,” Charlie nodded approvingly. “You got to think that way these days. Got to think about getting parts. Everything breaks down. That shows you’re smart. You make good decisions. If you make good decisions, you go further.” His attention shifted to the gun. “Whoa, what kind of gun is that?”

“It’s an air gun,” Ken said.

“If you’re looking for some firepower, kid, I can sort you out,” Charlie offered. “You don’t have to mess with an air gun, for Christ’s sake.”

“It’s for a friend,” Max lied. “My nephew. To shoot cans and the like.”

Ken hesitated. “You probably don’t want to have a kid playing with this without supervision. As I said, this fires something equivalent to a .22 caliber round. You can kill someone real easily with something like this if you hit a person.”

“He’s going to be using it with supervision,” Max said quickly. “His father. He’s like the army type.”

“You can kill someone with that, an air pistol?” Charlie asked, amazed.

“It will go through four inches of pine board,” Ken said. “At thirty feet, no problem at all.”

“Wow, you learn something every day,” Charlie mused. “Technology. It seems like I am living in the future.”

Aleski walked behind the counter and gave Charlie a look of quiet recognition. “You know this young man, Charlie?” he asked carefully.

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “He works for our friend, you know, on a thing we do. He’s a good kid.”

“I always say, it’s a small world.” Aleski paused thoughtfully. “I got to see you about that thing. Come through. You look like you have lost weight.”

“Do I?” Charlie turned to Max.

“Yes,” Aleski said, “You look good, my friend. Your cheeks are red. Good circulation.” He opened a door at the end of the counter for Charlie.

“I’ll see you, Max.”

“You got it.”

Charlie followed Aleski through the door. Before disappearing, Aleski turned and said something to Ken. When they were gone, Ken gestured to the gun and jewelry.

“The gun is on the house,” Ken said. “Compliments of the owner. When you come back, everything is twenty percent off. And you don’t need any ID anymore. Ask for me, Ken.”

Max broke into a smile. The luck seemed to be with him today. He told Ken to thank the owner, whom he guessed was Aleski. Then he spotted the lead fishing sinkers arranged to his right. “Lead has a low melting point, right?”

Ken paused. “Yeah.”

Max glanced around and asked if Ken had any laser measuring devices, the kind that could tell how far something was away. As he finished, the phone in his pocket buzzed. For a moment, he didn’t recognize what it was. Ken had started to move

from behind the counter to direct Max to another cabinet, but now Max had Ling's phone out and saw the message he'd been waiting for.

It was from Akando, asking where Ling had been. He had found the phone on the front seat, where Max had left it.

"Where?" the message read.

Max would of course have to be stupid to meet. Now he knew that Akando was a cop.

5

CHAPTER 5

Max decided to set the meeting at the Chinese restaurant listed on the menu, since it was the only address he had. From what he could tell, the restaurant was mostly empty during the day, so he would be able to tell Akando to take a table near the window. That way, he'd have a clear line of sight around him while still being in public. The entire time he waited, he felt like it was the worst possible thing he could be doing.

He didn't even know if Akando worked for Mr. Benson, like a lot of the police force. However, he guessed if Akando did work for Mr. Benson, he probably wouldn't have been on trial anyway since Mr. Benson also owned a lot of the judges and district attorneys. At least, that was the rumor. But if anyone could own all of them, it would be Mr. Benson.

Why was he like this, Max wondered, looking at the menu with a smile? It was like the old disease inside him was back—the feeling he liked when he was too close to the edge and every part of him was saying he had to step back. Here he was again.

The waitress asked if he was ready to order. He decided on the chicken wings. She poured him some more water, then left

with the menu.

But now Akando came in. As he looked around, it didn't seem like he was looking for Ling. He was looking right at Max. He walked up to the table and stood there.

"I knew you were following me," said Akando. "I seen you outside my house." His large, thin hands wrapped around the back of the chair across from Max. He was no longer in the suit he had worn at the courthouse. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and blue jeans. His neck, arms, and hands were covered in heavy amounts of beaded jewelry. "Why do you have Ling's phone?"

Max leaned back in his chair. He took out what was left of the gold ingots he had sold and threw the bag on the table. There were two ingots inside.

Akando leaned forward and inspected the ingots. He then sat down and took them in his hands. "Where did you get this phone?"

Since Max was talking to someone facing fifteen years come sentencing day, Max told him the truth.

"You've got a pair on you," said Akando. "Either that, or something's wrong with you. This is some bold play right here. I almost respect you for it." Akando leaned back in his chair and seemed amused. "So the phone, the gold—was in the tank of that toilet?"

Max nodded.

"So why are you following me? You think I know where Fort Knox is because you read some messages on a phone?"

Max leaned forward now. "I know where the mesas are. I just don't know which cave."

"No, you don't."

Max took out his cellphone. He showed Akando some

video of the landscape he had taken. It showed the mesas, the sweltering heat, and had Max's voice on it. Akando stared at Max. The video was short.

"Well, all right then," said Akando. "You're not a stupid kid. So you're here because you don't know where the cave is."

Max put away his phone. "The text messages say you have GoPro footage."

"I got footage. But I'm not showing it to you."

"I thought maybe we could put the two jigsaw pieces together."

"They froze all my bank accounts, and I'm facing fifteen years. I'm only here because I still have enough friends in the Detroit PD to provide me with a window so I could come here without them tailing me. But in the next few days, there's no life for me anymore. If you're a cop in jail, it's goodbye. So I can run, but in order to do that, I need money.

"You're lucky because my mother lives in California and is terminal, and I'm still allowed to fly until I'm sentenced. And so, I can come with you." He paused. "I'm not going to show you that GoPro footage. But I'm going with you. And when I'm with you, I'll point out that cave to you, and we'll both load up and then go our separate ways."

"You'll point out the cave?"

"You get me where that cave is, and I will point out the one with all the gold in it."

Max leaned back. "It's hard to take you there," he added. "It won't make sense unless Ling has filled you in."

"He has not told me anything. In fact, he said the same thing. He said he could not explain it to me—he had to show me. I don't know what that means. But all I am saying, you point and I go. I won't ask any questions."

"It will be hard to not ask questions," said Max.

“I figure there’s something about this place that makes it special. I can’t find any satellite photos of it. I can’t find anything that matches. And following evidence is what my job is. I even showed pictures of those caves to a friend in the bureau, and he couldn’t track down that place. That’s his job. Part of me thinks it’s not even real, that the footage was made on a computer, but I don’t have a lot to lose right now. And I knew Ling—he was a lot of things, but he never lied. And besides, the only thing he knew about computers was how to send an email. So I can’t see him somehow generating pictures. And now there’s you, sitting there. You say you’ve seen this place as well.”

“I’ve seen it, and I have been there.”

“So you’re not going to show me the footage unless I take you?”

“I would say you’re a fast learner, but I would be lying. I just said that. Pay close attention—you will never see the footage of the outside of the cave. I’m not showing you anything that would lessen your chance of taking me. I either go, or you go without.”

“It’s hot there.”

“Ling told me it was so hot, about all you do is wish you were somewhere else.”

“It’s a hundred and sixty degrees Fahrenheit in the shade.”

“He also told me that I didn’t need to take an international flight to get there.”

“That’s true,” said Max.

“So if it’s in the United States, which seems impossible, because as I said, I had someone in the bureau check every map. And that is his job, then where is it? Can you at least give me the state?”

Max waited, and shook his head.

“Guy at the bureau said that if it wasn’t showing up there was a reason. Maybe, he said, it could be a government site of some kind.”

Max did not reply.

“I just want some clarity as to what you want. I mean, if we are flying down, or somewhere, then I can set us up with bikes, truck on the other end. I still have a small amount of cash squirreled away, to at least do that before they froze my bank accounts. Then we head out from there to wherever this is. You need a helicopter? I could scrape together money for that as well.”

“We can’t fly down there,” Max said. “But you will need a dirt bike. You will need to bring it to a location I tell you, just before we go.”

“So that’s a yes then, to me riding shotgun on this.”

Max thought long and hard, but then he smiled. “Yeah, all right. I mean, I don’t really have a choice. You are the piece of the puzzle I need.”

“Okay then, done deal, on the bikes, and everything else. I’ll be there when you tell me to be there. Sooner, I hope, rather than later. All you have to do is give me a half-hour window beforehand, because I have to make a call to someone in the department, so they’ll go soft on my tail. But I don’t want to hear beforehand that I need some passport or something because we’re flying to the Middle East.”

“We’re not flying anywhere,” said Max. And maybe it was because most cops were human lie detectors, but this seemed to confuse Akando, although he then seemed to accept it.

“Right on,” he added. “Well, I guess I’ll just wait to see how this magic trick unfolds, because that sure looks like somewhere far away from here.”

And it would be some magic trick, Max thought. A hell of a magic trick that he himself still did not know how it worked.

“In the messages,” Max began, “it says there’s a cave where at the end of it, there’s some type of trumpet thing. That’s where the gold is.”

“That’s where it is,” said Akando. “That strange-looking, fantastical thing. With all its walls covered in golden ingots that no one could spend in a lifetime. Even now it seems like it’s from some Arabian Nights fairy tale or something. Where it came from, who the hell knows. Why it is sitting out here, who the hell knows. But it’s there and it is what it is. Maybe some Mayan king made it and left it to appease some snake god or something. Hell, I don’t know.

“All I know is, that on the outside, the bars are small like the ones on the table—towards the middle where they get larger and larger. And at the end they are even bigger. The size of a good old-fashioned phone book. All we have to do, as Ling said, is just bring our crowbars.”

“And that will get them off?”

“Ling was a small guy. He figured to get the larger ones free, it would take the force of two people. But the smaller ones came free, no problem.”

“What is it?”

“The trumpet thing?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been thinking about it every day. At first, I thought it was like Mayan, but it makes no sense how it could be out there like that and no one could have found it. I don’t know what it is. But I know that it can change lives. And it sure is going to change mine. And yours.”

A thought occurred to Max. “What happened to Ling?”

“I have no idea. I know he didn’t go by himself out there, though. He needed me. He needed another set of hands to get those larger bars free. It’s hard to get them off the wall, in that heat out there. You need another pair of hands.”

“All right,” said Max. “I’ll call you.”

“You better be quick about it,” Akando warned. “If I’m behind bars, you will never know which cave it is.”

He needed to check the ground before making a run for the cave. While something small might handle the terrain fine, he worried about taking something heavy like a motorcycle out there only to discover the ground was floating on some black liquid sea or alien quicksand. It was also crucial to check for rocks that might be invisible on the plain due to their color and the relentless glare of the sunlight.

Next time he was in the alien world, on his first run through the lift, he spent all his time fixing a punctured tire on the electric bicycle, sweat pouring off him as he pumped it up, the physical effort overwhelming in the intense heat. He’d tried sourcing a new battery from an electric bike store in the city but had no luck—they would have had to order them in, which would take too long.

On his next run, he went straight to the bike and pedaled toward the clusters of mesas. He moved carefully, checking the ground for any large stones that could knock someone off a faster, heavier vehicle. Everything on his body felt like it was burning. He stopped periodically to check his timer, unsure if he’d even make it half a mile before having to turn back. He wasn’t just riding but stopping constantly to pour much-needed water over his head. The water vanished within moments, like liquid hitting a hot griddle.

The ground, however, proved consistently hard-packed. It was perfectly flat with only occasional small pebbles—no large rocks. If the terrain stayed this clear all the way to the mesas, they'd have good riding conditions.

He wanted to explore further, but his body had reached its limit. He estimated he'd covered almost half a mile, though he had no way to be certain. Three times he'd dismounted to kick at the surface with his boot, verifying its consistency. It was like concrete—rock-hard dirt. Best of all, it was flat. If they needed to cover the distance, three miles Ling had said to reach the cave, a good surface would save precious time. This terrain was ideal.

According to Ling's text messages, it was three miles to the cave from the lift exit. Riding at a fast clip of 60 mph across the hard-packed terrain meant three minutes to reach the cave. The return journey would take about six minutes, moving more cautiously with their cargo. The entire trip—there and back with some leeway—would take around nine minutes total. Leaving five minutes as a safety buffer meant they would have twenty-six minutes in the cave to collect the gold.

Between the two bikes, they could carry three hundred pounds total—two hundred on Max's motorcycle and a hundred on Akando's dirt bike. Though he doubted they'd get near that weight, if they did, at the current price of gold Max had checked before work, they could walk away with nine million dollars.

Sweat streamed down Max's forehead, his clothes completely saturated. He checked his timer and took a drink of water, the heat so intense it felt like his skin might blister. After a brief rest, conscious of the time pressure, he began the ride back.

By the time he reached the refrigerator, he was nearly

collapsing, his movements sluggish and uncoordinated. He grabbed water from the fridge and drank heavily, only to immediately throw it back up. Dizziness overwhelmed him as he staggered.

The timer's insistent beeping cut through his disorientation. He hadn't yet disposed of his load.

Fighting what he guessed was heat stroke, the world swaying and light-headedness increasing, he stumbled to the forklift and climbed aboard. As he backed into the sphere and put on his respirator, he dropped his gloves. The moment he reached for them, the door slammed shut with devastating force, severing the gloves in half. A moment more, and he would have lost his hands.

His face must have told the tale when the door opened, because Lou looked at him, sweat running down his forehead. Max couldn't help it—he started laughing and slapped his leg. It had been close, so close. A second later and he would have lost his lift.

Only a few minutes ago he felt like he was dying from the heat, about to topple over. But now he felt alive again.

Lou just looked at him.

Max kept laughing. But then he gathered his composure and, with a giggle, placed his gloves behind him.

"While you were in there, I got a phone call about you. Just at the warehouse phone."

Max's smile faded. He wondered if he was about to get found out. All his snooping around down the drain. But of all things, Lou started talking about a building a block away.

"I've heard that on your way home, you have been setting yourself up at the end of the street down there. Then you have been sitting there, waiting for those wild dogs to catch up with

you, barking like hell, and then you have been hitting the gas and shooting down to the corner and taking it and sliding around it, while those dogs chase you. Is that about right?”

Max had no way to defend it. It was all true. In fact, he had opened up the fire hydrant even more, so that there was a greater flow of water to freeze across that road. Three times he had almost ended up overshooting that corner and ending up in the ditch there. It would have been death for him then, because the dogs would have come sliding in to join him. Those mouths finally getting a taste for what they were hungry for.

“Are you listening to me?” said Lou. “Tammy called me directly. Which means someone saw you. She would only call if they had eyes on whatever it is you are doing down there. My guess is trying to kill yourself, because apparently going through some alien machine to another world is not enough to get the blood pumping.”

“Just a little bit of fun,” said Max, confessing.

“Look, it’s not my job to tell another man what he should or should not be doing after work,” said Lou. “But that suicidal stuff stops now. You want to do that, you don’t do it around here.”

“All right,” said Max. The way Lou seemed angry, although he was holding it back, it almost felt like an invitation for Max to do it again. But of course, he did not want to lose his job, and better yet, he had something even more interesting to do. “I won’t do it again.”

“Kid, if you want to enjoy life, you have to learn to slow down a bit. Take a look around you.” He then waited. For a moment Max thought Lou was going to ask where his missing gloves were, but instead he just said he was leaving half an hour early.

“If you want more responsibility, kid,” said Lou, “then you

have to act responsible. But I think you have been told that before.”

“Now and then,” said Max, reflecting.

“Mr. Benson has a snowplow out here, and salts the roads, but I guess you would rather have it full of black ice.”

Max would, as a matter of fact, but decided to just say he liked the snowplow. In fact, he had seen it twice at night. He had always wondered how fast it could go. “I don’t mind good roads.”

“All right, well no more trying to get yourself killed.”

“All right.”

When Lou left, Max already had the thermoses ready to go. But instead of walking outside and placing them on the steps for Thomas, he just went to the office and remained there looking at them. All he needed was to add one extra ingredient. Here was his crossroads—there was no going back now, not that he wanted to. He had to finally see the cave and come back with all the fruits of his labor: cash out all that gold and head into the sunset with Natasha to never be found again.

He had everything in place that he needed, at least most of it—apart from the heat resistance suit and a few other more esoteric things that he would have gathered, equipment-wise, if Akando had not insisted on going so quickly. But maybe it would all just make everything more exciting.

Max reached under the office desk where he had taped the bottle of powdered xylazine from Ling’s apartment at the start of his shift. He pulled it out, staring at it for a long moment. There was no coming back from drugging the muscle. The only response would be a bullet in the back of the head. Of course, they would have to catch him first. And if he was fast enough—and he was—that would never happen.

From the start, it would be through the lift, and within thirty-five minutes, he would be back with the gold.

Not wanting to get Thomas in trouble, he spent a few moments writing out a note, which he left taped to the phone in the office—a confession of source, where he even drew a small motorcycle underneath with a stick figure riding it with a smile on his face. He then made sure to add some lines to make it appear the motorcycle was going fast.

At least there would be no mistaking where the target would be—right on his back for the rest of his life. Good, that felt about right. Max had no intention of slowing down once he was moving—it was only about speed going forward. By the time everyone woke up from their dream, he would be on the distant horizon.

Max recalculated the right dose of the xylazine, based on weight, for Charlie and Williams, just to make sure. He needed to determine how much to put in the coffee so that one cup would be lights out. He didn't want to kill either of them—he was not a murderer, so getting the dose right was crucial.

They were killers, Charlie and Williams. They were here because they knew how to drop bodies when needed. Even though Charlie came across as friendly, that's what he was, and he would have no problem putting one in Max if he caught him. Maybe it would come with a "Sorry about this, kid," or, "You knew the rules, kid. What are you doing?" But he would put Max in the ground, no problem.

And that is why Max had to go fast. He would have everyone on his heels this time, all those barking dogs snapping at his back as he ran for his life. He had been training for this all his life, and now was the final race. It was either get out in one piece or be torn apart.

Max carefully measured out the white powder into each thermos, dropping it in and mixing it around. After making the coffee, he called Akando and told him to be ready in two hours. "You pull in only when I call you on my cell. Don't come close to the building—just sit on the outskirts until I call."

Outside at the back door, Max waited for Thomas to come over so he could give him the thermos directly. When he arrived a few minutes late, Max said he did not have any cookies or anything to go with it.

"Lou said he was going to bring in cake, but he must have forgotten," he said.

"All right," said Thomas. "But they are going to miss their sweet stuff. I know they like that with their coffee." Then he added at length, "You want to come shooting again? I can do some soon if you want, on my way home."

"Nah," said Max. "I got to take care of a few things tonight." He paused. "That Williams, how long does it take him to go through one of those?"

"I don't know—he starts with a cup. He loves his coffee, but he'll drink it slow."

"Charlie the same?"

"Charlie loves his coffee as well."

"Hey," said Max. "I got something for you." Max took out an envelope and handed it to him.

"What is this?"

"That there is a ticket to watch some of the races at the Michigan International Speedway. I had it lying around, figured maybe you might be into watching some smoke out there."

"For me?"

"Yeah," said Max.

"Thanks, I'll see you tomorrow."

CHAPTER 5

Max nodded. “If you see Lou in the meantime, tell him I put his coffee cup in the office beside the phone. He’ll know what that means.”

“All right,” said Thomas. He started his bike, gave Max a nod, and headed out toward Williams.

6

CHAPTER 6

Max waited an hour inside, making sure both Charlie and Williams had finished at least a cup of coffee. He carried a packet of cookies as he went to check on them—if they were still awake, he'd claim he found them in the kitchen.

When he reached the neighboring building, he found a heavy iron security door at the top of a wooden staircase. Max held out his cookies and rang the buzzer, but there was no answer. A security pass-through slot was at the bottom of the door.

It was like the ones they had in some jails—just a metal flap. Max crouched down to the ground and pushed open the flap to peer into the room. About twenty feet away, he could see Charlie lying unconscious in a chair, snoring, with an empty cup on the floor beside him. His hands stretched out on each side as if he were about to give someone a great big hug. The chair sat in front of a wall of security monitors displaying infrared camera feeds from all the streets around Max's building. From what Max could see, there didn't seem to be any feeds from inside the building—maybe because of the lift, or because Mr. Benson didn't want anyone outside to know what was really

going on inside.

Max went back down the stairs quickly and headed toward Williams's Impala, holding up a bag of cookies. He found Williams slumped over in his puffy black jacket and stocking cap, a line of drool flowing from the side of his mouth. Through the dark windows, Max could barely make out Williams's face, which was turned slightly away. Williams was tall, mid-forties, well-built, and sported an impressive amount of ice on his fingers—six assorted rings in all. The interior was neat and tidy—you could tell a lot about someone by the inside of their vehicle, like looking into their mind. Williams was clearly someone who liked to keep a tidy house.

Max tapped the window. No answer. Nothing. If he hadn't seen him breathing, fogging up the glass near his head, he would have thought he was dead.

All was well in the world.

Max went to the front of the building where the steps weren't as steep. He laid wooden boards down to create an improvised ramp at the entrance, then wheeled his motorcycle up the makeshift incline and into the building, pushing it all the way down the hallway until he was outside the double doors to the warehouse. He left his motorcycle on a kickstand before them. He walked back to the changing room where he called Akando.

"You at the edge of Poletown East?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Akando. "I am here. But as far as I am aware, there are no airports near Poletown. So if I am hauling this dirt bike somewhere to be shipped overnight, in a plane or whatever, I would rather just go straight there."

"All right, make your way down to that address I'll text you. Keep your distance until you see the front door open." He hung up and called Natasha. It was a minute before she answered.

"Baby, it's really early," she said. "I was sleeping."

"You need to go to the living room," he told her carefully. "And you need to read that note I left for you under the couch, in that place I told you about, that I would leave something if I needed to."

"Baby, what note?"

"Go to the place I told you about. Under the couch. I put a note there. Follow what's on that note. And you need to meet me at the location written there."

"Baby, you're scaring me."

"It's okay, darling, it's nothing to be scared about," said Max carefully. "I just need you to follow the note, all right?"

"But I have yoga this morning, baby?"

"Listen, darling, it's really important. Like really important, okay?"

"Okay, baby."

"You need to meet me at that location. And you need to wait for me. And make sure you have the things on the note."

"Baby, what is happening?"

"We're going to be rich, baby," Max told her truthfully. "That's what's happening. Filthy rich. You won't need to take a dime from your father ever again. We're going to be set for life."

"We're finally going to France?"

"Get that book on French and start practicing," he told her, then added not to talk to anyone or do anything except what was on the note. "Make sure you follow what's on that note, down to the letter."

"Okay, baby."

"Je t'aime, darling."

That note had something in it that Max had never wanted to write. It said that if he didn't show up, she needed to go stay

with her father—at least until he contacted her. He didn't get along with her father, who hated him, but her father could keep her safe.

As a soldier, a general, and her father, at least he was good at that.

He stepped back outside into the cold, sharp air, just in time to see a red Nissan Frontier pull into the parking lot—two dirt bikes on the back. Inside were Akando and a short, round man with hoodies on, both with baseball caps under their hoods to give more shade to their faces, each with sunglasses on.

"We got everything. The saddlebags for the bikes, backpacks, everything," Akando announced as he exited the driver's side of the truck, scanning the neighborhood.

"What the hell is this?" Max called. "I planned for just us."

"More hands mean more gold," said Akando. "This is Rusty, my partner. The hammer is coming down on him as well, and he wants out. He's dialed into everything."

"I know you," said Rusty. "You were part of the bust-up at that chop shop."

Max had seen him before, vaguely remembered. "You need to bring both bikes inside here. And you need to move that truck behind that building across the road, where people can't see it."

"There is no one around here," said Rusty.

"Just move the bikes, Rusty," said Akando. "And move the truck as well."

"You get the saddlebags I left to be picked up," said Max, coming down.

"Under the tarp."

But Rusty went on. "Unless he has a cargo plane in there, which I don't think he does, then what the hell is the point of bringing the bikes in there? If we are going to get on the road

to this place, then we have a lot of driving. We should just get on the road.”

“I said I would not ask any questions,” said Akando. “But if we are still sitting around in half an hour, that is going to change.”

“We won’t be sitting around in half an hour,” said Max. “This will just go faster, if you just do what I say.”

Rusty lowered the tailgate of the truck and put down his own ramp for the bikes. “I don’t want to leave my truck here.”

“What do you care?” said Akando. “We are not coming back for anything, including the truck.”

Something seemed to dawn on Rusty. “It’s my brother’s truck.”

“Who cares,” said Akando. “Buy him a new one. Now let’s move the bikes.”

They brought the dirt bikes through the double doors, and Rusty reparked the truck behind the neighboring building. Then they changed into coveralls and rubber boots while Rusty asked why.

“There’s toxic waste in the warehouse,” Max said. “You don’t have to bring a respirator, you don’t have to wear coveralls, but I’m telling you it would be best if you did.”

“What kind of toxic waste?” asked Rusty.

“The kind you don’t want to breathe in,” said Max.

“Just put on your mask, Rusty,” said Akando. “Let’s get on with it.”

Soon they were all changed and moving the bikes through the double doors at the end of the hallway. Before the double doors, where Max’s motorcycle was parked on a kickstand, Max spent the next fifteen minutes fixing the saddlebags to his motorcycle while they did the same with theirs. All were a mixture of hard and soft bags. Max had one hard luggage bag,

which he mounted to the back. They had triple the amount of saddle and luggage bags that their bikes should take, but it wasn't to fill each bag until they could take no more. It was to keep the loads evenly spaced.

"I take it you both know how to ride a bike," Max asked them. Akando nodded, and Rusty just said he had a ten-speed at home and he would get the hang of it. It was almost comical, and Max found himself smiling.

"You always have that weird smile on your face," said Akando. "What's so funny?"

"I don't know," said Max. "Sometimes it all seems like a joke."

"What's that?"

"Life," said Max.

"This guy is cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs," said Rusty. "He has a screw loose."

But Akando was now looking at how Rusty had tied up his saddlebags. "How the hell do you ever get your shoes on in the morning?"

"Just fine," said Rusty. Akando readied his saddlebags, making sure they were tight. Then they put on their respirators and went through the double doors and down the ramp carefully, thankful it was a slight decline, and came down into the storage room.

"Why is everything a strange color in this place?" asked Rusty through his respirator.

Max told them.

"So if the drums leak, you see it because of that blue light?" asked Rusty.

"He just said that," said Akando. "Do you have to repeat everything?"

"There is nothing down here," said Rusty. "How the hell are

we supposed to get to this desert place?”

“That’s a good question,” said Akando.

Max told them to head to the sphere. “That’s the lift—we put the vehicles in there.”

“Why?” asked Rusty.

“I told you,” said Max. “It’s a lift.”

“Listen to this guy,” said Rusty. “Whatever jail they had him in must have scrambled his brains.”

Max told them again to go to the sphere, to push the bikes up the ramp, and then park them inside. Rusty asked why again, but Max guided them forward, now ignoring Rusty’s comments, until they approached the sphere where Max’s motorcycle already sat on its kickstand. He went inside to move it closer to the concave edge to fit the other two bikes. He beckoned them into the sphere. Once they had Akando’s dirt bike inside, Rusty walked back onto the ramp, hopped down, then examined underneath the cradle.

“I can see under this thing—it’s not attached to anything. It’s just some globe sitting on some iron with a bunch of hoses underneath.”

Now Akando came halfway down the ramp, just as Max pulled the lever. Compressed air hissed through the hoses—they came alive like moving snakes. Akando was saying something to Rusty, but Max could not hear what they were saying. Then Rusty started to walk past Max.

“Where the hell are you going?” he asked, looking at the lift.

“None of your business,” said Rusty, almost at the ramp to the building.

“He is going to bring the truck around to the outside of that loading bay,” said Akando. “I want the truck close. I don’t know what the hell we’re doing in this little pantomime you have here,

but I don't like being that far away from our only ride."

Max had to go now; he ran up the ramp and inside the globe and watched Rusty about to go through the heavy double doors at the top of the ramp, but then Akando called out to him. The vibration in the lift began to creep up his spine now, rattling the back of his skull.

Akando called out, "You gave me back the keys." But with the vibrating getting more intense, the last part came out softer; he was distracted. "What the hell is happening?"

Rusty came running back, but Max called to him to stay away from the door. "Do not come in," he said. "That door closes, and you are dead."

"There is a lot of vibrating in here," said Akando, but Rusty ignored Max and walked forward, standing in the door for a split second before it closed like a lightning-fast guillotine, and the front of his face, as well as four fingers and his left foot, were sliced off in a split second. They all fell to the ground, apart from his rubber boot, which just sat there.

The entire lift filled with a burning heat and intense light.

Akando examined Rusty's head and other body parts now lying on the ground. Rusty's head had landed face up. His eyes moved for a moment at strange angles and then stopped. Akando turned and gazed out at the twin suns blazing in the sky.

Max was frozen by the horror as well; for a long moment he just looked at the strange array of body pieces with no life in them anymore, like some marionette that had its strings cut. He felt the timer around his neck, and he had forgotten to set it. He took hold of it blindly as Akando surveyed around him.

"I told him to stay away from the door," Max defended. "I told him not to move forward. I warned him about the door."

Akando turned and asked Max where the rest of Rusty was.

But Max knew the only thing to do now was to stay on mission. He had boosted enough cars to know that when things went wrong, you had to keep focused. Right now, it felt like the lights were behind him, but he had to drive and keep an eye on the road. He removed his visor, telling Akando to do the same, but Akando was looking around with a strange daze in his eyes behind his.

“Take off the respirator,” Max said again. “We only need it when we go back through.” He walked to his motorcycle, brought up the kickstand, and pushed it forward down the lift’s ramp until he met the white ground. The front headlamp fell off and shattered—the lift had destroyed the glass. Not that he needed a headlamp anyway. As he moved forward a few more feet, his side mirrors fell away next, and the glass that covered his gauges—all falling from the movement, cracking, and hitting the ground.

Max hoped the rest of his motorcycle, the parts that really mattered, had come through intact. He glanced back at Akando, the hot air already making them both sweat. “You need to take off your respirator. It will only heat you up faster. You need to get on your bike, and we need to go.”

Akando broke from his daze, walked out, and looked around. He was confused, and he had every right to be. A lot of things had hit him at once. But right now, Max had no time to deal with it.

“We got to go,” said Max, climbing onto his motorcycle. “So either you are getting on that dirt bike and getting rich with me, or you are staying behind.”

“I don’t understand anything.”

But Max’s mind was filled with what was before him. He

hoped his motorcycle still worked on this side of the lift, just like the generator next to the fridge. They were both motors, after all; both ran on good old-fashioned Detroit gas. He turned the key, and his motorcycle started without a problem, shaking the last of the glass free. “Rusty is dead,” Max added. “And he is not coming back. This world is like some alien planet. But you don’t have time to soak those things in. None of that matters right now. All that matters is you need to follow me; otherwise, you’ll stay behind.”

“It’s like a spaceship?”

“If that works for you,” said Max. “Take off your respirator. You don’t need it here.”

Akando took off his respirator, letting it fall around his neck. “Rusty is dead?”

Max felt like saying that that was a heavy “yes,” and the chance that the military Humpty Dumpty back there was going to be put back together again was nonexistent, but instead, he tried to be more diplomatic. “He’s gone.” He waited. “We need to go, and that is the last time I’m going to say it. You just have to put it all together later, and we have to go forward.”

Akando glanced at Rusty’s head. “I was pretty sure Rusty looted one of my dope stashes from me anyway. I was going to confront him. But now here he is.” He glanced around again, like he was seeing everything for the first time, a blank expression on his face. “So, what was Ling, an alien or something?”

Max studied him. “No, just someone who worked a strange job. But we have to move. We have less than forty minutes, and we have to get there and back.”

He then seemed to find something inside him, like the puzzle pieces were never going to fit together. At least not now. He

went to his dirt bike and climbed on. He kick-started it, and it came to life. Everything made of glass on the dirt bike fell away. He just looked ahead like a zombie.

"You are going to have to lead the way," said Max. "I don't know the cave."

Akando glanced around.

"The mesas are behind the lift."

And in that instant, Akando came forward on his dirt bike and then turned around, and Max followed until the full scope of the mesas beyond was revealed to them. Akando started forward with Max beside him, although Akando now seemed like someone moving in a dream.

The heat was unbelievable, like he was riding into the air of a hair dryer. There was no cool breeze; it was only unrelenting hot air. He wished he had a windscreen; if he had planned longer, he would have had a lot of things that would have been useful.

He was moving faster than he thought possible on his motorcycle, the roar of Akando's dirt bike just in front of him, Akando's long red hair flying about the sides of his head like fire. The large mesas slowly came into view until they were close, and they passed between the two middle mesas. The shadows were cast in the other direction from where they were riding, so there was no relief from the twin suns.

The gigantic mesas on both sides held more caves than Max could have ever guessed; the mesa to his right was almost half a mile wide, and the one to his left was almost a full mile. Thousands of small caves riddled the lower mesas with openings halfway up.

Akando flew onward, and Max followed him as they went between the first two mesas. Max could still not see the cave

but followed Akando as he slowed his dirt bike to the middle of a smaller mesa that appeared behind the larger mesa to their left. It came up, and Max saw a dome structure, just visible a mile or more away, that bent out of the desert. It was chrome, only visible as they edged to a smaller mesa hidden behind the larger mesas to their left. It was still a hundred feet high and hundreds of feet wide. The cave in the middle of its base had only a small scattering of other caves nearby.

Akando turned first, directing as they met the gravel track of the cave they were looking for. The cave was larger than Max had imagined. Its mouth was jagged, rising like a giant set of black teeth. They proceeded slowly on the gravel path inside, with Akando telling Max to keep in the middle. The gravel at times skidded under their tires. Rays of light streamed through a nest of thin tunnels in the ceiling that reached up into the distant crown of the mesa far above. It felt like riding slowly through some strange Gothic cathedral.

They slowed down, and then Max saw it as they arrived. The cave opened up to a full view of the hot sky above. But in the giant rock face before them was a perfect golden cone that went into the rock face for a hundred feet. The ground all around them was covered in a scattering of small crystals that made everything glitter.

"It's more beautiful than in that video," said Akando. "It's like something from a damn fairy tale."

Akando went further, and Max followed, taking a brief moment to glance at the timer. They had taken twice as long to get to where they were. The cave entrance had been far slower to navigate. They advanced until they were before the massive cone. It was fifty feet across and a hundred feet deep, with what looked like millions of small golden ingots tiled along the sides,

the size that Max had found in Ling's apartment and sold. They lined the outer ring and got larger and larger as they journeyed toward the middle.

Akando rode slowly into the mouth of the cone with his motorcycle until they were ten feet from the hole at the end of the cone. The ceiling was now only just above their heads, but the ingots were each a foot long and half a foot wide.

Max knew they would only need a few to set themselves up for a lifetime. But each one would weigh at least 50 pounds or more. Each gold bar would be worth at least a million and a half.

It felt better to be in the shade of the cone. The slight drop in temperature seemed life-saving, and the hole, which they were now twenty feet away from, seemed to be bringing in cooler air.

Now that Max was closer, he could see it was more of a shaft; a perfect circle that was drilled into the rock at the end of the cone.

They cut the engines of their bikes to let them cool and brought their crowbars to the wall, picking a large gold bar at random to work on. It was fixed in the wall as if the wall had once been clay and had somehow then hardened into rock. It seemed like the bar was just pressed in. But Akando got the end of his crowbar underneath, and Max took the top.

"I almost didn't think it was real," Akando commented as they pushed down. It began to come, but they had to press hard. Sweat rolled down both of their faces. Akando's eyes were hypnotized by the gold before them, and Max wondered if his were the same.

The bar gave way. They took their crowbars out and repositioned them, dug in again, and the bar fell onto the ground

before them. It was then Max studied the ground for the first time—the floor was filled with small crystals that glittered. Max picked one up and examined it.

“What are you doing?” said Akando. “You said we have a time limit. We have to get back into that spaceship, right?”

“Yeah,” said Max, putting the crystal in his pocket and getting back to work.

“We fill your bike first,” said Akando. “Then mine.”

They moved the bar to Max’s saddlebag and placed it inside. Then they did another bar and another. Time was running out, but they were at a good pace, with a good rhythm. Max thought they could at least get three more bars, and Akando agreed.

No wonder Ling had recruited Akando. He needed to unless he was going to live on picking off smaller pieces. And when each ticket here might cost you your life, you wanted to make sure you took as few runs as possible.

The danger of it all, though, excited Max. And he couldn’t help it; as his body now felt so overheated, with sweat running from him like a waterfall, he started to laugh.

“What is wrong with you?” said Akando.

“Nothing,” said Max. “Nervous tic.” They both pushed down on the crowbar, and the massive ingot moved, then came out and fell before them. Akando took it and went to Max’s bike, placing it in a saddlebag.

Soon, they had six gold bars, around three hundred pounds. That was too much when Max added up the weight; it was one thing to ride with an extra three hundred pounds, but to do it over a fire-hot wasteland in burning temperatures was another thing. He went to take out a gold bar and place it in the saddlebags of the dirt bike, but Akando stopped him.

“I got too much weight,” said Max. “Plus, we have to pack

your bike now anyway.”

But Akando then pulled out a gun from the saddlebag of his dirt bike. He aimed it at Max.

“Move back and out of the way,” Akando said. “Move back, so you are not in the path of the bikes.” Max complied, stepping backward into the light that burned his eyes to look at directly.

Max felt the heat cooking him. “You don’t even know how to get back.”

“You said forty minutes, right?” said Akando. “You set your timer to tell us when we had to head back, is what you said. Head back to that spaceship, or whatever the hell it is.”

When Akando had loaded all the gold, he pointed his Glock at Max. “Well, goodbye, Max.” He pulled the trigger, but the gun didn’t work. He aimed and pulled the trigger again.

Max began to laugh.

Akando kept pulling the trigger, but his gun wasn’t working. “What the hell?”

“You killed Ling, didn’t you?” said Max. “What, when he wouldn’t tell you where this was?”

Akando just pointed at Max again and pulled the trigger; nothing happened.

Max took out his air pistol from his holster. “You kill him?”

Akando looked at Max, breathing hard. He aimed one more time and pulled the trigger, but nothing came out.

“You kill him?”

“Why? You going to leave me out here to die?”

“Did you kill him or not?”

“Yes, I killed him. I shot him dead at the back of some empty Detroit house overgrown with grass. I rolled him up in a carpet and put him in the basement. Left him there to rot. I grew up with him in the same foster home; we were tight as you could

get. He was my only friend when I was brought back from the Res when my mother hung herself. So how about that?”

Max hesitated, keeping his air pistol aimed.

“There are rules: you don’t talk to the DA. That’s in the world you come from and mine.”

Max wondered if he could pull the trigger. He wasn’t a killer; at least he didn’t think so. He could leave him behind, but that would be the same thing as death; it would just be slow. He kept aiming, then brought his other hand to the pistol as well.

“You can’t pull the trigger, can you?” said Akando. “Look, let’s take the gold back. The same deal applies. I understand that it’s hard to come back from what I tried to do, but at the end of the day, we can move past this. We don’t need to see each other anymore after this, and you’re the one with the gun. Mine clearly doesn’t work. I bet it was Rusty; he knew that I knew about how he looted my dope stash. He probably was thinking I was bringing him somewhere to put a bullet in him.”

But now, like some type of magic trick, Akando was standing there, holding his arms out with a “what are you going to do” expression, when in a second there was a black strand around him. It was a black wire that came around his midsection and another around his arm. One moment they weren’t there, and the next moment they were around him, all extending from the black circular hole behind him at the center of the cone that was six feet wide.

It happened so fast; another strand, and another. They squeezed Akando, who seemed strangely drunk, and Max saw the venom that covered the wire-like strands and the small hooks. They moved and sliced open Akando’s arms and body; he gazed at Max, his eyes growing bright red.

More strands were searching about in the cone, and Max,

who had been frozen, finally staggered backward, though it seemed instinctual, without any thought behind it, as he felt hypnotized by the slow horror in front of him.

Strands were around his motorcycle and the dirt bike now, wrapping around them the same as Akando. Akando screamed out into the day, his fire-red hair around his shoulders and his eyes filled with horror.

No words Max could understand came out, only a primal scream of some creature caught in the claws of another, unable to escape. There was no attempt to escape because it seemed impossible. More of the black wire that extended from the hole in the middle of the cone came out and wrapped around not only Akando but also the bikes as well, wrapping around and catching the tires, pulling them, and then just as fast as it had caught everything, everything was gone, so fast that it was like it was pulled away by the hand of a running giant.

Everything was pulled into the six-foot hole in the cone at such speed. The motorcycles, Akando—all of it vanished with impossible speed. The motorcycles shattered against the hole's edges as they were dragged in, scattering pieces in their wake. And then silence.

Max lay there as another strand came out and started feeling around. At light speed, Max turned and ran. It was not even a thought, but something in his bones that made him run toward the cave mouth again, his boots pounding against the floor of crystal and gravel, just as he turned behind and saw the strand from the hole had come out, almost covering half the distance in the opening before it.

Max fell forward, his hands hitting gravel, his chest pumping in the heat as he kept running. He had some type of stone or gravel in his boots now, the large rubber boots; if he had known

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he would be running, he would have worn sneakers. But he had the clumsy rubber boots.

CHAPTER 7

The merciless sun beat down as Max lay there, pouring with sweat as he exited the cave, falling onto the gravel path before it. The small crystals everywhere glittered, hurting his eyes to look at them. His water was back at the motorcycle, leaving him with nothing. If he had not known how hot the ground was, he would have collapsed and lain on his back. But if he did that, he might as well be lying on a frying pan. So instead of falling to the ground, he just rested as best he could, with his hands on his thighs as he breathed in the hot air.

His body was roasting; he could go no further with his coveralls on. He removed his utility belt with the holster and air gun, still glued to his hand, and then his boots, emptying the dozen small crystals and stones collected in them when he fell. The open mouths of the boots scooped up the stones like a shovel. But just as he emptied them, he saw the crystals glitter, and maybe because he wanted to take his mind off the burning all around him, he studied them. They looked like the raw diamonds a girl had shown him in her father's jewelry shop when he was fifteen. Her father cut diamonds. The light caught

them the same way. They felt hard.

He did not know if they were really diamonds, but he put them in the pouch of his utility belt. He removed his coveralls. He had to stand on his boots as he did so, so he would not burn his feet. Then, when he was in his boxers with his utility belt back around him and his holster with his air gun, he put back on his boots.

The sun was frying him now that he was still. Then he picked up the coveralls again and hung them over his back and head as he shuffled along in the blazing heat. The direct sunlight felt sharper than normal. Maybe because he was in this world at a time when no one usually came here. Maybe there was a reason for that—the sun now had a certain sting when you were stationary, like it was laced with acid. He didn't even have his sunglasses anymore; they had fallen away somewhere.

Max glanced back in the direction of the lift; he would never get back in time. And with no one to start the lift on the other side, there was no going home. Right now he had to get cool—like some preternatural instinct, he had to get out of the sun. Everything else he would have to think about later. The fact that he wasn't headed back to Natasha already was starting to hurt in another way, and the idea of never seeing her again, he could barely think about. At least right now.

He stumbled in the direction of the chrome dome he had seen on the ride to the cave. It was in the shadow of the two mesas. He hoped it was cooler there. Slowly, as he went, with each passing minute, he felt this would be the moment he would collapse, fall down into the searing heat, and never wake up again. Without any animals to feed on him, he would likely become some strange mummified body. The thought made him laugh strangely as he pressed forward, unsure if the heat

was making him lose his mind, his brain slowly cooking, or if it was something else inside him coming out—that mad part of him starting to take over. The part that climbed the Ferris wheel and called out to Natasha from below. The part that started driving faster when the police were trying to catch him. The part that concocted a plan to do an interplanetary gold heist.

Either way, it all seemed so humorous now as he labored toward the chrome dome, its form getting slowly larger until, with his body burning and sweat rolling down every part of him, he came to its reflective walls that surrounded the dome behind, rising from behind like half a silver balloon.

Max dragged himself along the wall, finding partial shade on one side. He rested in it briefly, then turned and labored down the next side. His hands, which were in full sunlight like the back of his neck, felt burnt. Around the next corner was a door in the reflective wall. He pushed at it, and it was unlocked. He guessed there was no point in locking doors in this world. He came through and began laughing madly.

Above the swimming pool hung a white reflective canopy that cast the pool in shade. At the other end, thirty feet away, was the door of the dome, which now he could see was made of reflective metal over some giant frame.

There were no windows in the dome of any kind, but there was a door, and it was across from the pool.

But Max wasn't here for sightseeing—he was driven by survival. He came down the side of the pool and pushed off the coveralls that were lying down his back, kicked off his rubber boots, then almost burning his feet on the side of the pool, quickly stepped in.

The water was cool on his skin, deep, and he sank down until

it reached his neck before stopping. The cool water encased his body. He submerged completely.

He felt like a baby inside a womb as the cool water covered him while he floated there, his arms spreading out on both sides like wings, as he floated like he was flying. Then he came up and took a breath, breaking the surface of the water.

He had no choice; he had to stay in the pool. Every part of his being told him that for the time being, he had to stay in the pool. He had to cool down. And that is what he did, because there was nowhere else to go. He went to one end of the pool and just sat there in the shadowed end, on a step with water lapping over it, and looked at the water move.

There was cool water coming through holes in the steps, and he reveled in it. He had no idea where it came from; maybe the dome was sitting on a natural spring, but it was cold. And that was all he cared about: cold and flowing around his legs and feet.

He was not sure how long he sat there, but he felt tired; soon he was lying with his back in the water and looking up at the silver canopy moving about softly. He gazed up at it, and thoughts he had not considered since childhood filled his mind. Maybe it was because he felt trapped. Anything outside the moment he was in now was going to hurt him. This world was unforgiving. Even if he knew when the lift was going to come back, he would have to walk three miles to return to it. There was no way he could walk that. He almost died walking half a mile from the cave.

But there was someone living here—who was it? Someone had built all this. Maybe they were some kind of kind soul who would tell him to get in the car and drive him home.

He remembered once when he was sixteen, hitchhiking after

the car he had stolen had decided to break down twenty miles from anywhere.

A middle-aged man had picked him up. He had been starving—hungry, thirsty, and everything else in between. That man had pulled into a bakery and told him to get anything he wanted. Then Max ate in the car, and the man just left Max at the side of the road, where he wanted to be left. That man never wanted anything but to help someone.

Max watched the canopy move. Soon he closed his eyes, with most of his body covered in water. It felt like he had run a marathon, and his body wanted to just shut down. Soon he was asleep. He only woke when water started to lap into his mouth and he felt his airways blocked. He opened his eyes, took in a deep breath, and forced himself to crawl out of the pool.

When he reached the side of the pool, he decided to leave the coveralls on the ground and put on only his rubber boots, as everything still felt like it was burning, including the ground itself. He let the water evaporate around him, taking some heat with it. But everything, even in the shade, felt like standing before a furnace now that he was out of the pool. He stood in his wet boxer shorts and fought against returning to the pool.

The front door was unlocked. Upon entering, he was welcomed by a cool room where he could hear the air conditioning but couldn't see the unit. He kept his air pistol ready as he closed the door behind him. The air conditioning was a lifesaver. In the short time since he had exited the pool, the water had already evaporated from his skin.

He walked through a door that opened into a massive room made of the same reflective material as outside. A chrome staircase integrated into the left wall curved upward to another floor. The only other things in the room were a glass cube sixty

feet square, filled with a white gas, at the far end of the reflective dome. Beside the glass cube was a silver rectangle, some type of cabinet, and two gurneys.

With no clear direction, Max walked slowly toward the glass cube. The metal floor was cool below him. When he came to the glass cube, through the mist, he saw two bodies which, even through the thick fog, he recognized; and not only that, but inside the misty cube, he could see a black sphere.

But he was looking at the bodies. They were both dressed in red coveralls. One had red hair and the other had black, and it was a face that Max had seen in the mirror all his life, although now that face was lifeless.

Max could even see Akando's dirt bike and his own as he came around the thick glass to where he could see the open mouth of the lift. Inside were the bikes laid out as they had been when Max, Rusty, and Akando had parked them inside.

Max couldn't see clearly through the mist, but he would have guessed that somewhere inside the mouth, by one of the tires of the dirt bikes, was half of Rusty's forehead as well, along with other parts.

Max glanced around at the gurneys, all polished and clean. He had no idea what this place was, but it was giving him a headache just thinking about the fact that there was a dead version of him within the white cloud inside the cube.

He turned to see the polished rectangular cabinet filled with metal drawers. There were hoses hooked up to it, and a machine hummed behind. Max went forward and reached for one of the drawers, seeing the front of his reflection in the polished surface and the reflective surface of the dome behind.

He pulled out a drawer, and inside was a frozen body. But

again, one he recognized. It was him. He touched the surface, and the skin of his clone was ice.

He opened another drawer, and it was the same. Each drawer was filled with an exact copy of Max. He kept searching, and that is all he found in every other drawer.

Soon Max was stepping backward from the drawers. He remained motionless, disoriented, listening to the hum from behind them. There was nothing else in the giant dome apart from the staircase. Max drew his air pistol and kept it ready, although he was not sure what he would be aiming at.

Then, from a door at the side of the dome, like the one Max came through, someone Max recognized came through; he was forty pounds lighter and at least twenty years younger, with his hair shaved. It was Lou, or looked like him. But this version of Lou had part of his forehead removed; above his eyes, in the middle of his forehead, was an indentation the size of a golf ball.

Max watched, and Lou saw him but simply walked past Max as if he were invisible.

“What is this?” Max asked, confused more now than ever.

But Lou ignored Max and simply took a gurney and pushed it forward to the set of drawers that Max had just been looking at. He pulled the drawer out, and when it came out, he pressed a lever on the side that jacked the drawer up so it was at the height of the gurney. He moved the body onto the gurney.

Max watched. Lou came to the back of the gurney and started pushing it.

“You hear me?” Max asked.

Lou kept pushing, and Max followed him through the door into a small garage that was cool inside. In the middle of the garage, before the garage door, was a refrigeration truck.

Lou opened the back of the truck and moved the body into the back, then shut the door. He climbed into the side of the truck and got behind the wheel. The garage door opened and everything flooded with heat. Had Max had anywhere to go, he might have followed. But he had certainly missed his ride home.

So he just waited there as the door opened and the truck drove out into the wasteland. Max did not get much time to see where it went because the door closed again.

Max walked back inside and was about to head back to the cube to see if some of the mist had cleared when he saw two more Lous at the base of the staircase. They were the same as the Lou that had taken away the body, both with golf ball-sized indentations in their foreheads. Between them was what Max first thought was a corpse being carried down the staircase. But when it was placed into a waiting wheelchair, the figure moved. He still had flesh on his bones, though his skin bore some type of black growth that covered it. His body appeared slightly mutated, as though the bones were growing in different directions inside him.

Once the man was settled, one of the Lous placed a headset on his head, which hung lopsided as if he lacked the strength to even hold it straight. He looked at Max with one dull eye.

“Had I not been so superstitious about these things,” said the man, his voice weak and breathless, “I would have just fed you to my lord, like all the others. But you are different—you have beaten the odds, and that interests me.”

Max asked who the man was.

“I’m your boss, Max,” he said. “Mr. Benson. But not the Mr. Benson back in Detroit—the first Mr. Benson. The one that found the device, the lift, so many years ago, and now lives in

this land so that he can be closer to the substance he needs.”

“What substance?”

“The cave you entered was a faucet of this land, once visited by beings from out in the stars who would pay homage to it. This was once a very important place in the universe. That cave is one of eight such caves where the creature can get above the dark water below this world to accept blessings. But its full form is only visible at the great temple, seven miles east. There, when bodies are fed to it, that appeases it, and it releases a substance as a gift. This can then be taken without fear of destruction.

“A substance that only it can make. And when this substance is taken, it can keep a being alive far past what their mortal flesh was designed for. I am living proof of that, being two hundred and sixteen years old. And here I am, still breathing and thinking about this world I am alive in.

“But of course, being alive is not the greatest gift. The substance enables me to share dreams with the creature, and sit and watch like in paradise as it wanders in its mind. All the great things it has dreamed of—real things, because unlike any other creature in the universe, it can see the future and the past.

“It showed me the history of this planet. How when the mountains were young, beings from the stars would come here. And then thousands of years ago, beings from our own planet, from Earth. It showed me so many wonders.”

“The Mr. Benson back at Detroit—he’s like a clone, like all these Lous around here?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Benson. “In a manner of speaking. But with a man that is yoked, in a way that makes him pliable to me.”

“Why are there so many clones of me out there, in those ice boxes and dead in that cube?”

“Tell me what your job is, and then its purpose.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your job, what you were hired to do. You do work for me, don’t you?”

Max thought. “I take toxic waste through the lift and dump it.”

“And the purpose?”

“To get rid of the waste.”

“And that makes sense. But if you look behind the curtain, then you have a different purpose.”

“And that is?”

“It has nothing to do with toxic waste. My surrogate back in Detroit has the drums filled across town from the Detroit River. Those are the drums you are moving. They are just water.” He grew amused. “Their purpose is only to motivate you to move your body through the lift each day. Nothing more. You go in, and you come out.

“You see, the lift is like a photocopier. One version of you gets into the lift in Detroit, and two versions come out here in this world. One version ends up at the pit, where you dump waste. The other version ends up behind that glass gasping for breath and dies. I need bodies, that is all this is about.”

Max wanted to glance at the glass cube, then around him. Another two Lous came down the steps and flanked Mr. Benson.

“If you think of it mathematically, you have been here a month. Each time you get into the lift in Detroit, you make nine trips through the lift. Each time you have a fifty percent chance of ending up here. So the probability of you going through all that without being gassed is quite rare indeed, if you think about it. But the chance of going an entire month without once ending

up on the gassed end, to not only that but to end up in front of me, is astronomical. In fact, that is the only reason why I am talking to you. The mere fact you are here is magical. There really is something incredibly special about you.”

Mr. Benson seemed deep in thought. “Had I not been so superstitious all my life, and someone that believes strongly in synchronicity, I would have already had you killed. But because you are so special, I had to at least wait to ask you if you had any message for me. Something you have learned in life, or something you wish to tell me.”

Max waited. “No offense, but I think your drug habit is out of control.”

For a moment there was quiet, but then Mr. Benson started to laugh, a raspy laugh into the microphone. “You think I have a drug problem?”

“Yeah,” said Max, smiling. “I mean, if you map it out a bit. The cloning people to feed to an alien creature, so you can feed your habit, is a bit of a warning sign.”

Mr. Benson kept laughing, although he seemed to slow down because it was hard for him to breathe. “I thought you would have something profound to say. Some piece of wisdom.”

“No,” said Max. “Not really.”

“You really cannot understand how divine the gifts from the creature are, Max. I have gone, without leaving my chair, from one side of the universe to the other. And time is slowed down.”

“That’s what everyone says,” said Max.

“Then this is where it ends,” said Mr. Benson.

Both of the Lous removed knives from their cloaks and started to come forward.

“I am the one holding the gun,” Max warned, stepping backward.

“Max, potassium nitrate degrades when it comes through the lift. You can’t have gunpowder without potassium nitrate. Combustion weapons are useless here, and bullets require gunpowder.”

“Yeah,” said Max. “I know,” and as the clones approached, he pulled the trigger of the air-powered pistol. One clone staggered back, clutching his chest, while the other collapsed with a hole in his head. The other two walked forward, and Max dispatched them the same way.

He aimed at Mr. Benson, who was shocked and just looked around. “But guns are not supposed to work here.” But Mr. Benson was trying to remove something, a knife, and Max shot him in the chest.

“Guns are not supposed to work here,” said Mr. Benson, although now he was breathing badly, looking up at the sky. “I had so much more to see and do.”

“This is an air gun,” said Max. And then Mr. Benson was dead.

But now Max caught not only his reflection in the curved chrome that surrounded him for the first time but also the reflection of his naked back.

When he did, he saw no tattoo there. There was nothing. No falcon. Nothing flying through the sky over ancient buildings, as some had said, or over forest, as others said. Nothing made out of stars, or fire, or rain, or thunder; there was nothing there.

His back was empty.

Diwata, the tattoo artist in the desert, had warned him—he could never look at his falcon directly, never see it with his own eyes. Otherwise the falcon would land and his protection would vanish.

It was then he felt something hit him—like a punch in the

stomach. A small thud. Pain surged through him, and he saw a final clone appear at the door he had come through from the pool, holding a golden crossbow. The crossbow bolt now protruded from Max's stomach.

Max tumbled to the floor.

The clone began loading another crossbow bolt slowly, but Max managed to aim his pistol and fire. He missed this time. He seldom missed a shot when he aimed; he always seemed to have good luck with it. He fired again and missed. Another crossbow bolt flew through the air and struck his forearm—a flesh wound. He aimed and fired twice more, and this time he was lucky: the clone fell back against the wall. One bullet hit it in the neck, and the other in the chest. A moment later, the clone was dead.

Max tried to pull the crossbow bolt from his arm, but it was barbed, and he couldn't remove it.

There wasn't much blood. He wasn't sure if that was good or bad, but every time he breathed, a stinging pain surged through him. He still felt alive, but for some reason, his legs felt weak, as though they would crumble if he stood.

He saw it through the glass cube—it was too thick to hear what was out there, but he noticed the disturbance in the mist surrounding everything. It sent waves from the sphere, rolling against the glass beside him.

But how was it functioning? It had been well over forty minutes. Unless it was...

"BBQ run," he muttered.

At least that near-mystic one out of a hundred times, the lift returned after roughly three hours, not forty minutes.

Blood poured from where the crossbow bolt had pierced his side, but he could still move. He staggered to the door, fell

CHAPTER 7

down, unsure if he could get back up, but rose and took a deep breath. He had to time it right; if he went in too soon, he would be left in the gas, trying to hold his breath. He paused, then opened the door and stepped into the mist. He almost tripped over Akando as he entered just as the door closed behind him.

8

CHAPTER 8

For a moment, he thought maybe the lift would open in hell or somewhere else. He didn't know if it came out in the same place as the lift that had taken him here. For all he knew, it might take him somewhere different.

Without the yellow visor, the entire inside of the warehouse was purple. He staggered forward, not wanting to breathe in anything that came from the lift, almost tripping over Rusty's body as he came down and fell to his knees. He took a breath. Rusty's body lay on the ramp without a face, his arm twisted at an odd angle, blood surrounding him.

Max had no coveralls and was standing in his boxers, freezing, with a utility belt around his waist that might or might not contain diamonds in the small bag attached to it. If they were just pieces of quartz, then it was all for nothing. All of it. He also had little money, so he wouldn't be able to get far. Instead of being rich, like he had told Natasha over the phone, they would be broke and running from a criminal enterprise.

Whatever the case, he had to move, even though his body was telling him it was time to be still. Time to lie down and not get

up. He first staggered to Rusty and tried to remove his heavy army jacket. But with the bolt inside him and knowing he only had limited energy left, he gave up. Instead, he rolled Rusty over, then again, until he fell off the side of the ramp. It almost killed him. He waited for the mist to clear, and taking a breath, walked back up the ramp to the lift to collect his motorcycle. With everything he had left, he climbed onto it. Then it started; the headlight fell from the front and crashed to the ground like it was made of sand.

But his motorcycle started and slowly rode up the ramp to the double doors and down the hallway. His vision felt like it was failing him at times, but as he concentrated, it seemed he would make it to where he needed to be. The moment he came down the hallway, he pulled the dirt bike around, the smell of gasoline filling the air, the sound of the dirt bike echoing in the hallway. At any moment, he expected Lou to come out with a clipboard and ask him what he was doing, but there was no one anywhere.

He was blessed in that regard.

He considered dismounting to put on warmer clothing, but the fact was, every moment he stayed here was a risk of death. He had planned for forty minutes, but he had been gone for hours.

Max pushed his way through the double doors, barely making it, and into the freezing mid-morning air, his body starting to shake. A thin layer of snow covered everything. He came down the steps without a ramp, thinking it would be no problem, but his strength left him, and his motorcycle went sideways off the steps before he hit the ground hard, the motorcycle overturning next to him. Something seemed to break in him then—now a deep throbbing pain that seemed to be rapidly growing. Blood

was in his mouth for the first time, and that was really bad.

His lungs didn't seem to like the cold air. But he came to his feet and was about to walk to his motorcycle when the door to a black Impala parked across the street opened. He went to his motorcycle, but just as he came to pick it up, like his life depended on it—because it did—Williams stepped out and surveyed the scene before reaching for his gun. Each breath sent waves of pain through Max's side, where the crossbow bolt was still lodged.

"Hold up, homie," Williams called out, although with a drunken slur to his speech. "We got to straighten a few things out up in here."

Max drew his weapon and fired. The effort made him gasp in pain, and he missed, but Williams's return fire from his .45 echoed down the empty streets. What saved Max was that Williams seemed like he was firing with double vision. Maybe he hadn't drunk much of the coffee, but he'd drunk enough that he wasn't walking straight, and even at close range, when Williams fired twice more, the shots just hit the snow-laced pavement beside Max.

Max fired, emptying what was left of the slugs in his pistol. He fired, and one hit Williams, who fell backward, tumbling briefly before his back hit the pavement. Still, a moment later, he lay there with his hip bleeding.

Max studied him. "The keys in there?"

Williams examined him. "Do your worst, homie," he said. There wasn't a shred of fear in his voice. Max reached down and picked up the .45 because his air pistol was empty. He dropped it on the ground. He checked the chamber of the .45; it was empty, so he dropped it as well.

The cold flowed over him. He would not last long in this

cold; he had to get to somewhere warm. He walked past his motorcycle and toward the Impala.

Williams did his own drunken dance back to the door of the warehouse, probably to call someone. But Max made it to the Impala and got inside, finding the keys dangling from the ignition. Williams's cellphone was also on the passenger seat. As he sat, he had to take a deep breath because the pain was so intense. But as he watched Williams reach the warehouse door and find it locked, he could tell he didn't have the keycode. You could get out of the building by just opening the door, but you couldn't get in the same way. Williams just sat there on the steps and stared in Max's direction, one hand holding his bloody leg.

Max started up the Impala; the rumble of that well-tuned 427 V8 was like medicine to him. It was his first time behind the wheel since he'd gotten out of prison a year and a half ago. It was just a pity that he was dying. There was a bulletproof vest on the passenger seat, which Williams had forgotten, or had no time to put on, and a half-eaten hamburger on the tray of the open glove box.

Max could see it had onions on it. He hated onions. It was chicken and cheese.

But everything else about the Impala said that Williams and he must have shared the same spirit animal, because he could tell Williams had done everything right with the Impala. The custom headers, the upgraded manifold, the perfect rumble in the motor; it was a labor of love.

Max pulled out from the curb, getting a feel for the Impala; it felt like home. He had only gone two blocks before a new pain bloomed in his stomach, shooting up through his body. It was so sudden he had to pull over to the side of the road, while he

tried to position himself in a way to lessen the intense agony. He rested and breathed for a moment, shifting in the seat until the pain eased. It dulled to a throbbing ache, as if the crossbow bolt was no longer rubbing against something inside him.

He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw a 2015 black Ford Mustang EcoBoost; down its sides was the Detroit Police moniker.

The window came down, and behind the wheel was a black man with a no-nonsense mustache and short, sensible hair, and a set of eyes that looked like the kind that saw through people all day long. On the passenger side was a woman with a ponytail and shades that were seated on her head; both were in civilian clothing. The black man had a badge around his neck which he held out the window. But below that driver's side door, Max knew he had a gun pointed at Max.

He gestured for Max to wind down the window. Another unmarked car pulled up behind him.

"You are not in trouble," said the female police officer. "We just want to talk to you. So turn off the engine."

Max revved the engine; the black man had been chewing gum but stopped.

"Wind down the window," said the female officer. Behind him, a cop who had exited the rear car drew their gun and pointed it at the back window.

"It seems you have taken something from someone," said the woman. "They want to talk to you. Now, all we need you to do is get out, put your hands over your head, and walk back toward the curb."

No one swept the roads in the abandoned district, no one salted the roads; so there was a lot of ice everywhere. You had to be really careful. And Max knew the abandoned district well.

He had been riding through it and around it for a month. He loved waiting for those dogs to catch him out by the Packard power plant; those little snappers. They came out of the dark shadows there like little furry missiles.

“Turn off the engine, and get out of the car,” the voice from the loudspeaker said.

Max examined the stereo and decided to see what Williams was listening to. The LCD on the stereo said he was listening to “In the House of Stone and Light” by Martin Page.

Max pressed play. He had never heard it before, but then again, he didn’t really listen to much music. But after a few seconds, he decided he liked it.

He just never thought someone like Williams would be listening to it. But, as Natasha had read to him in a magazine once, most people had a secret part of them that they kept hidden from others.

Max had wondered what his secret part was, since he did not feel he had one.

Max turned up the song.

“Exit the vehicle,” a voice commanded from a loudspeaker behind him. It was then that Max saw another police car turning a corner from the block beyond. It stopped and waited.

Max listened to Martin Page sing about stone and light for a moment, concentrating on his breathing. The pain was almost too much.

He had one shot at getting away and like normal, it was a long shot. Normally he would have already taken it, and most likely when his luck was good he would have gotten away. He always had good luck. But now it seemed like his luck had left him.

He was not sure he would make it.

One block down there was a death trap. The corner he had

been taking with his Gold Wing when the dogs were chasing him. The same bit of fun that Lou had told him he wanted him to stop, because the mysterious Tammy who Lou phoned in the load times to each shift, had told on him.

Tell-Tale Tammy.

But that had been fun, while it lasted. Hitting that corner at speed while the dogs were snapping at his back wheel, only to turn just in time before the ice to see those dogs go skating like hockey pucks across the street and out into that storm drain that was filled with six feet of powder.

Of course, Max was on his motorcycle back then. Now he was in something much heavier, Williams's 1969 Chevrolet Impala SS with a V8 engine. He would have to get that corner just right; too late and he would end up in that ditch. The only thing that would save him is he had to turn at just the right time. To take that corner perfectly.

Without his luck, he felt for the first time naked.

Twice even with his luck he had almost gone into that ditch.

If Natasha only knew the strange things he got up to on his way home.

"This is your last chance," the voice from the loudspeaker said. "Get out of that car, get onto the ground; it does not have to go down like this. We just have someone who wants to talk to you. You're not being arrested. We just want to talk."

And that part was most likely true. No, he was going to be taken to the back of wherever, and have one put behind his ear, while they kicked him into a shallow grave.

Max reached to the passenger seat for the vest that was there. He could not put it on, because of the arrow sticking out of him, but he could put it against the driver's side door. He did.

"This is your last warning."

But Max ducked down and floored the Impala and opened up the V8. The back window burst open and bullets went through and turned half the front window into a mess of broken glass. At the same time he heard a series of dings in the driver's side door and something hit his leg as well as the vest at his side. But now he was gone.

He could not see, so had to judge the first turn blindly, but he pulled the handbrake, and spun the wheel and when he peeked up only for a second as a line of gunfire sprayed around him. His seat exploding with fiber and the side of his dash coming apart in an instant.

Max only glanced up long enough to catch the death trap and then the back mirror for a moment before it exploded in a hail of glass.

Both cars were blazing after him.

Max did not hold back; he came back down blindly as another hail of gunfire cut open the Impala. For a moment his back felt hot, and he thought it was his tattoo, returning to him, but he knew a bullet had taken him in his shoulder because now he could barely move his arm without shooting pain. He pushed on though, and counted it out in his mind. His arms moving then, without thinking, his feet dancing on the pedals, as his free hand pulled the handbrake, pumping it, just enough before he pulled the wheel around, and then floored the Impala, tires spinning, burning into that ice. He only came up again to turn the wheel.

A part of him thought that he would have ended up in the ditch.

But instead all he saw was the clear street ahead, as his tires finally caught the road and then he came forward, only to take his foot off the accelerator. He could hardly see; his forehead

was cut and now blood was running down his face. Broken glass was everywhere.

Behind, both cars had gone tearing through the chain-linked fence and into the snow. Only their trunks were visible from the edge of the storm drain. It was almost comical, and if he wasn't so broken he might have even laughed, because he could tell they were trying to get out through the back windows because all their doors were covered in thick snow but the back seat was barred, being police cars.

Max was about to put the car in gear, but a French bulldog was beside the Impala barking. Max looked at the hamburger, which by some miracle was still hanging out of the glove box. He leaned across in great pain and cracked open the door but the dog broke through, and for a moment he thought his good will of tossing out the hamburger, in a final goodbye, was going to end with him having to chase it out. But instead the dog came in and just started barking at him in a friendly manner, its tail wagging. Max took the hamburger and gave it to him and the dog snatched it from the paper bag and took it away with him.

Max studied the dog for a moment as it ate on the street and then he put the Impala into gear again and went forward; there was a rattle in the motor now and he could smell gas. But he went back onto the road, looking behind him only long enough to see one of the police, a woman, reaching the bank.

Max waited a moment to start "In the House of Stone and Light" by Martin Page again, pushing out the rest of the broken glass so he could see clearly, then put the Impala into gear and went forward. His new friend kept eating.

As he came to the railway bridge in Hamtramck he found Natasha waiting for him. She was beside her small blue

2014 Honda Civic in the snakeskin jacket, red heels and black leggings.

She glanced at him as he slowed to a stop, her face immediately concerned as he met the curb and she finally took in all the blood.

“Oh my God, baby.”

“You have to meet me at the place I wrote down on that note,” Max managed through the pain through the broken side window. “I’m heading there now. You need to drive there, after you take this to that pawn shop I told you about over the phone.”

“Baby, you are bleeding really bad.”

She came to the window and opened the door, horrified at all the blood. He reached into the small bag on his utility belt and took out one of what he hoped was a raw diamond—just small enough to not attract a great deal of unwanted attention, unlike the golf ball-sized one he had in there. He felt as if he was putting all his luck into it, which he was.

Natasha began to cry as she looked at him—the crossbow bolts sticking out of him, his no doubt pale face. He took the small diamond and placed it in her hands and shut her fingers.

“You need to take this to the pawn shop I wrote down in the letter. Say it’s from your mother or something; I don’t know. But you need to sell it. I think it’s a diamond, but I don’t know yet...”

“We’re going to need cash because where we’re going, we don’t want anyone tracking us. But whether it’s a diamond or not—because maybe there will be bad news—you need to pick up some things. They don’t cost much. I need something that can cut metal, like a chain or something. It’s the only way I’ll cut off the barbs on these crossbow bolts and get them out of me. You need that. And you need to get a medical kit. Something I

can patch myself up with.”

“We have to get you to a hospital, baby. You can’t patch this up easily, baby.” Then her face filled with tears. “You have an arrow in you.”

“I can’t go to any hospital; they’ll be looking for me.” His voice was growing weaker. “You need to take this into the pawn shop and get something that can cut a chain. They have that kind of stuff there; I saw it last time I was there.”

Natasha kept shaking her head. “You need to go to the hospital.”

Max shook his head.

“What about the police?”

Max just looked at her. “We have to do this just you and me, darling.”

“But you could go to hospital.”

“They will kill me,” Max told her plainly. “They’ll be looking at all the hospitals. They’ll find me and kill me.”

“Who will kill you, baby?” She waited. “Are you mixed up in bad things again?”

“I just wanted to make us rich, darling,” said Max. “But we’ll see. If that just turns out to be a piece of quartz, then it’s all for nothing. Either way, we have to leave town.”

“You need to go to the pawn shop in the letter. We need some travel money and won’t be able to use any credit cards, or anything on the road. So we need cash.

“Then come to the place on the letter I say to go to if there’s trouble. It’s an abandoned meat processing plant at the edge of Poletown East. It has this open area below where we can hide vehicles. You can find it easily because you can see the smokestack. Then when you come around, you will see the entrance to the parking lot underneath.”

“Baby, please let me drive you to the hospital.”

“I love you, darling. If that is really a diamond, that will keep us afloat long enough to sell another one. And at the end of the trail, we’ll get to France.”

She wiped her tears, nodding. “To France.”

Max kissed her. “I love that coat you’re wearing, darling. You always suit everything you wear.”

“Thank you, baby.”

And like that, Max revved his engine and pulled away from the curb. His stomach filled with pain from each movement; somehow, it felt better when he kept his arm loose at one side. He wasn’t even sure he would make it to the abandoned meat processing plant or that he would even survive the wait.

CHAPTER 9

Natasha parked her car outside the pawn shop and stepped out, the gold nugget wrapped in a shirt. She walked in her heels toward the entrance. A white van sat parked outside, unremarkable except for its presence at this hour.

Inside, the large man behind the counter introduced himself as Ken. Aleski watched from behind the counter. Natasha's hands trembled as she showed the man the crystal, her mind on Max, bleeding somewhere in the darkness.

"What is it?" asked Ken, inspecting it.

"We think it's a raw diamond," said Natasha, her eyes red from crying all the way there. "But we do not know."

Aleski watched her. "You look like someone that has had a lot of misfortune."

Natasha nodded. "Yes, I have."

"Well, let me inspect the stone, and we will see if your fortune changes."

After leaving the pawn shop with more money than she could carry in her handbag, she drove through the empty streets,

following Max's instructions to the letter. Her heart pounded as she drove, and the roads were icy but she was a careful driver.

At one point, when she came to the edge of Poletown, her brakes seemed to fail her, and she drifted forward and hit the back of a small Volkswagen van. An old woman had exited and asked if she was alright, but all she could do was cry as she pushed her head into the steering wheel, telling the old woman to please forgive her, but she had to go. Her boyfriend was dying, she said. He is bleeding to death.

Natasha descended the stairs of the abandoned meat processing plant, following the beam of a flashlight. She had parked above in the underground parking lot and had followed the instructions on the letter to the staircase. At the bottom, in a massive open area, she found Max crumpled over, seated on a small metal stool, already dead; his upper body naked. His eyes were closed, and his head tilted forward and his hands cradled around his stomach. Bloody tools were scattered around the ground before him from his failed attempt to remove the barbed crossbow bolt, which still protruded from his stomach.

She approached slowly, tears streaming down her face.

When she reached him, she started shaking, her hands unable to reach further, but she came to him, and his body felt cold. She knelt before the stool he was on and cried into his shoulder, her hands moving to his back to hold his cold body, to where the tattoo of the falcon was, which she had first seen the night they made love.

Afterward, he had turned to show her and told her to tell him what she saw. She saw a falcon moving across the desert, where below was a lone man walking with a discarded car behind him.

Max had told her he got the tattoo in a desert from an old lady with turquoise eyes who had a purple bandana—the brightest

purple he had ever seen.

She had told him he could never look at the tattoo himself; otherwise, he would die. All protection would leave him.

Natasha held him tight, crying so hard into his shoulder that she felt like she would break the world. Hot salty tears fell, running down her face, as she pushed her fingers into his back, into his skin, trying to hold onto him, pull him back from wherever he was.

And it was at that moment she heard a gasp of breath. As she pulled back, she found the love of her life looking back at her.

He was alive.

Thinking and seeing the world.

His hands came up to her face, although they felt like they might be warmer now, and he looked so deep into her eyes that it felt like he was piercing secret parts of her and she would burst.

“I had a strange dream, darling,” Max whispered. “I was going so fast, so fast, like the wind, but then a voice told me, a familiar voice darling, that there was no one chasing me anymore. And I did not need to go fast. And when I slowed down, there was no one behind me. And it felt good to just sit here.”

Natasha kept crying, but now a shadow appeared at the bottom of the steps; the old lady, of course, the veterinarian, whom she had rear-ended at the intersection and told her that her boyfriend was dying. “Dangerous people want him dead, so I can’t take him to a hospital,” she had said.

The old lady came down with her medical case, placing the case on the small wooden table where Max had a collection of things he had been trying to pull the arrow out with.

Strangely, the color was coming back to his face.

“I lost my tattoo on my back,” said Max. “My falcon aban-

doned me.”

But now the old lady was coming close, asking Natasha to move back; she needed to look at him. And as Natasha moved, she could now see his back; his falcon had not gone. It was brighter than ever before.

Although it was different, or maybe her memory was wrong. What she had seen before seemed to be fading, but there was the falcon now on top of a black sphere of some kind which sat on a white plane.

Above, two suns.

“Well, you did not hit an organ, I don’t think,” said the old woman. “So you sure are lucky.”



About the Author

I miss the times when stories were just about entertainment. Every page I write is there to entertain you, the reader. And I never lose sight of that.

Raised on a steady diet of *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, I developed an enduring fascination with stories where ordinary people stumble into extraordinary circumstances. This influence shines through in my work, including my debut novel *The Bootstrap Paradox*, where house renovators discover a gateway to the past in an old house. I write stories where my characters keep a firm foot in reality while another foot rests in the unknown.

My storytelling philosophy is simple: entertain readers with carefully crafted tales that challenge our understanding of reality while remaining grounded in authentic human experience. Each story serves as a doorway to the extraordinary, inviting readers to explore the thin line between the familiar and the impossible.

If you want to keep track of my work, make sure to follow on Amazon and sign up for my newsletter. Thank you for reading!

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