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# The Desert King

T. F. Torrey

# Dedication

Dedicated to Frank Hiralez and Duane Bennett, the real desert kings.

The silence, the power, the solitude, and the greatness of the desert dwarf petty concerns, refreshment for the soul.

—Mark Johnson, *The Ultimate Desert Handbook* 

T. F. Torrey

### Prologue: Phoenix, Arizona, 1985

My name is Jack Trexlor, and this is not my story. This is John Lupo's story. Partly it's Macy's story, too. Maybe Sharon's. And it's a part of Erica's story that I don't have any real right to tell. I was there. I saw most of it. I was in it, but it isn't my story.

I think about it quite a lot now, the way everything worked out. It's weird how little decisions, little coincidences, had such a big impact on our lives. I often wish that we'd had more time, or less distance. Frequently I wish that we'd done a lot of little things differently. Even a few changes would have made a big difference.

Sometimes, though, it seems that there was never a question, never a risk, never a chance. Sometimes it seems that all of our lives were cast from the start to take that adventure, that our fates were set in stone and we were all just passengers bouncing in the back of the big pickup truck of life.

If we *had* never taken that adventure, I would perhaps never have grown in the ways that I have since then. None of us would have. Whatever wisdom we gained from that adventure, though, we paid for with ourselves. It never seems that the meager results we gleaned were worth the price we paid, the price some of us still pay in the quiet night.

However, if we had merely stayed home, other people would have paid. Of that I'm certain. We couldn't have stopped the toll from being collected, but I wonder often why *we* had to be the ones to pay it.

Most of all, I just wish I hadn't gone with Macy and John that first night. Maybe things would have been worse for someone else, and maybe not. How can I know where an alternate path would have taken us? I can't. All I can know is how the choices we made led us to where we are

### The Desert King

now. I can't know all of what *might* have happened, I can only know what *did* happen, to us.

And mostly I don't like it.

### Part I: Friday

### Chapter One: Friday Night

No good adventure ever began with a *no*. On the night everything started, though, that's exactly what I was trying to say. It wasn't that I didn't want to spend time with my old friend Macy, or that I wasn't open to adventure. It wasn't even that I was scared—well, not *that* scared. I was just trying to stay out of trouble.

That was soon after I had stopped driving to work. Without my car, I wouldn't be able to drive around after work and get lost; I'd pretty much have to go straight home. I wouldn't be able to give drunk girls a ride home; I'd have to call them a taxi. Walking to and from work, I thought I could just tend bar and keep my nose clean and stay away from trouble. That's what I thought.

But I was wrong.

My old friend Macy Barnes showed up one night at one a.m. as I was closing down the bar. He gave me a ride home, and we drank a couple of beers. Then his friend, John Lupo, whom I did not know, showed up. They began talking about playing some game involving the police and shooting guns. Then they wanted me to play, and they wanted to leave now.

They swallowed the last of their beers and stood up. John took a small revolver from his pocket and popped out the cylinder to make sure it was loaded. He looked at it, smiled, snapped the cylinder back in, and put it back in his pocket.

Macy turned to me. "Are you comin'?"

Trouble had found me.

My old friend Macy was a California native and looked the stereotype with his blond hair trimmed short, shiny blue eyes, and stylish mustache. Macy was about five feet, nine inches tall, and at that time he was twenty-two years old. John Lupo, on the other hand, looked to be an American Indian of one sort or another. He seemed to be quite a bit older than Macy; I guessed about thirty, but I couldn't tell for sure. John was a couple inches shorter than Macy, but they were both built lean and firm, the way people get not from working out in a gym but from working hard for a living. They both looked like they could take care of themselves.

I was a few inches taller and a year older than Macy, but I did not work hard for a living, and I felt soft. "No," I said. "I can't go."

"Why not?" Macy asked.

"Oh." I thought quickly. "It's too hot tonight."

"This is Phoenix. Almost July. It's hot every night."

"This night feels hotter than usual," I lied. It could have been forty below and I still would have been sweating. I didn't like the police, and I hated guns.

"That's because it's more humid than usual," he explained. "Monsoon's coming."

"Uh-huh," I said. "What time is it?"

"A little after two."

"Whew!" I yawned a little. "I'm getting tired."

"Once things get rolling and your adrenaline starts flowing, you'll be wide awake. I guarantee it."

He didn't have to. It already was. "But it's so hot ..."

"You won't even notice. Besides, you can crank up the air and this little apartment will be nice and cool by the time we get back."

"What if we get caught?"

"We won't get caught. John and I have done this lots of times. Even if the police were to catch us, we'd just say we didn't know anything. They couldn't prove it was us. And besides, they won't even have a crime to arrest *anybody* for."

### T. F. Torrey

I thought about it. If we got questioned I *would* have the best alibi. I could just say I'd gone for a walk after work, that I had heard the shots but hadn't seen anything. It wouldn't have been the first time I'd lied to the police. And they probably got lied to all the time, anyway.

"Well?" Macy asked, smiling broadly now that he could see he had me hooked. "You coming?"

I stood up from the couch and picked up my beer. I paced over to the wall and back, swallowed the last of the beer, and studied the empty bottle. Ah, sweet alcohol, sweet maker of tough choices. I chose to look at the whole thing as a learning experience. Besides, no good adventure ever began with a *no*.

"Let me change my clothes," I said.

My studio apartment was on the corner of Eighteenth Avenue and West Devonshire, two minor streets without even sidewalks. Trees along the streets held out the light from the moon, and the streetlights were spotty and dim through the leaves and branches.

We walked south on Eighteenth Avenue and quickly reached Indian School Road. One of the arterial streets of Phoenix, Indian School was five lanes wide, with no trees to block out the moon and the streetlights. John turned left. Macy and I followed in silence. No one else was on the sidewalks anywhere. The traffic was extremely light, even for this time of night.

As we walked, I considered how we must have looked to any observers. Anyone seeing us walking down the street in the middle of the night would probably assume we were three young troublemakers. And they'd be right. Very nice.

Looking at Macy and John, I became acutely aware of how conspicuously I had dressed. All of us wore jeans. Macy and I wore running shoes; John wore moccasins. Macy wore a dark green T-shirt. John wore a dark blue flannel shirt with the sleeves ripped off at the shoulders, half buttoned up and tucked in. Here's the killer: I wore the first shirt I'd found in my closet, a button-down neon Hawaiian jobbie. It was suitable for tending bar, but it would be easily visible and memorable to any witnesses. Great.

John wore his brown outback hat, with his black hair hanging out the back down between his shoulder blades. Lots of people wore casual baseball caps, or sometimes cowboy hats, but the hat John wore was different—rugged yet sophisticated. It wasn't typical, but somehow it seemed to fit him just right.

Something else worried me, though. While my hair was dark brown, Macy's was pure blond. Without a hat, his sun-bleached mop glowed like a nightlight.

Great. If we were hiding and the police shot at the bright neon bull'seye they'd get me. If they shot at the brightest white thing they could see, they'd take the top of Macy's head clean off.

That was it.

"We can't go," I said.

Macy sighed.

John Lupo looked darkly at me. "Why not?" he asked calmly, not slowing at all.

"We're sitting ducks," I said.

"Let's take a south here," Macy suggested as we came to Fifteenth Avenue. "I don't want to go across Central."

We crossed at the corner. Apparently my comments were ignored.

Back then I had no sense of direction, and I got lost rather easily, so I used this term of silence to imprint our route into my mind. After a moment I continued. "Look at my shirt," I said.

"It's not that bad," John said, glancing quickly at it.

"It practically glows in the dark," I said.

"Hardly anybody's awake."

"They'll wake up when the shooting starts."

"That's okay. I don't think anybody'll laugh at you."

"I'm not worried about anyone laughing at me."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The police, or some neighborhood hero, won't be able to miss me. An hour from now I'll be in jail, or worse."

John sighed. "Relax," he said. "We'll be out of the area by the time anybody wakes up, and we'll be back at your place while the police are still taking statements from the neighbors."

I tried to think of another argument and couldn't. This was their game. They were the experts.

Just then I tripped over something on the sidewalk. I felt that tingling sensation you get in your stomach when you know your feet aren't under you. My hands shot out involuntarily, but somehow I managed to keep from falling down, merely stumbling off the sidewalk into the grass.

John kept walking. Macy frowned over at me. I looked to see what had tripped me. "What's a broken broomstick doing on the sidewalk?" I asked, anxiety quavering my voice slightly.

"It's just lying there," John said without looking back.

"I think it's an omen," I said, sensing opportunity.

"What do you mean?" Macy asked.

"I think it symbolizes that I'm going down tonight."

Suddenly John stopped and turned on me. "Are you just talking to keep your mind occupied, or are you really scared?" he asked.

I paused. It was a tough question.

"If you're really scared," he continued, "just go home. Macy and I will be back in a little while."

"He's just a little nervous, that's all," Macy said. "Let's go." They started walking again.

"That broomstick will probably be the worst thing you run into tonight," John said as they walked away.

"Or the best," I muttered under my breath.

When I caught up to them in a few steps I couldn't believe myself: a perfect chance to back out and I'd turned it down. What a jerk! Too scared to go and too proud to stay. I thought about it, and the only

conclusion I could come to was that my dignity must be just slightly larger than my common sense.

We walked hastily down Fifteenth Avenue, soon crossing Osborn Road and continuing past Phoenix College. Across the street on the left lay the Phoenix College stadium, the dark hulk of the bleachers rising straight up from the edge of the sidewalk.

From somewhere beyond the stadium, a screaming police siren cut through the balmy air. In Phoenix that was not alarming. In Phoenix, a siren blaring was anything but unusual. Instead, I found it rather comforting.

"That's reassuring," I said.

"What is?" Macy asked.

"The siren."

"Why?"

"Well, at least I know that some of the police are already occupied. That's two who won't get to shoot at me."

John shot me an irritated glance but didn't say anything. The sundarkened skin of his face absorbed the light and deepened the shadows under the brim of his hat, but the aggravation shone clearly in his eyes.

Macy didn't say anything back and the sirens died down as the stadium fell away behind us and we approached Thomas Road, another of the arterial streets. I was briefly disappointed, but my mood brightened slightly as another siren picked up off in the western distance. I kept my mind occupied judging its distance as we walked. It was south of us...and west of us...and getting closer.... I gave up. It was quite a ways away, but that was all I could tell.

"How far are we going?" I asked John, who seemed to be in control of the evening.

"Another half mile or so," he said. "Just past Encanto."

Encanto *Boulevard* was a residential street a half mile ahead of us. Encanto *Park*, a large municipal park with big trees, rolling hills, and artificial streams, stretched ahead of us on the left to a few streets past Encanto Boulevard. The Encanto *golf course*, on the other hand, briefly touched Fifteenth Avenue a little ahead of us on the right. As we reached the green light at Thomas Road, I wondered which Encanto he meant.

The police car whose siren I'd been judging suddenly hurled across the intersection, ignoring the traffic light, as we stepped into the street. As we crossed I watched him to our left. He switched off his lights and siren and turned up Eleventh Avenue out of sight. That didn't help my nerves any.

Past Thomas Road, Macy and John struck up a conversation about their last river trip and I walked in silence. Before long the golf course appeared on our right, lush and cool in the night. Here the streetlights were planted farther apart, and the palm trees cast darkness everywhere, and I started thinking about Macy's hair again. Seen from a distance, I knew it must be shining as bright as the moon.

Just as I opened my mouth to say something about it, the dog nailed me.

Preoccupied with our thoughts and conversation, we hadn't heard him coming at all. Just before he struck me, I heard his claws in the grass and whirled. He hit me square in the chest. I felt his teeth hard against my skin through my shirt. He knocked me backward against John. Before anyone could do anything, he was gone again, darting back into the expanse of the golf course.

"What was that?" Macy asked, whirling and half-ducking into a defensive position.

"Dog," I said, panting suddenly.

"Big dog?" he asked.

"Big enough," I said.

"I didn't even see him," Macy said.

"He's all black," I said. We stood still, straining to look for the dog in the darkness of golf course. John, I noticed, stood casually calm.

"Why didn't we hear him?" Macy asked tensely.

"We wouldn't when he's on the grass," John said.

"There he is!" Macy hissed suddenly, ducking and pointing.

And there he was, bounding across the grass toward us for another strike. I still stood closest. There was no time to run, even if there had been a place to run.

"Stand still," John said quickly.

The dog leapt right at me, going for my chest or maybe my throat. I threw an arm up reflexively. But this time the dog didn't make it.

In a lightning move, John stepped forward, right arm outstretched, and caught the dog by the throat just inches from my forearm. The dog let out a mushy yelp and kicked his hind legs, catching only air. John hauled the dog's face up to his own.

"Leave, dog," he said quietly. He threw the dog backward. With a yelp the dog landed on its back and scrambled to its feet. Instantly he turned and ran away behind us to the north. At the corner of a side street, under a streetlight, he stopped and looked back. He and John stared at each other for a moment, then the dog barked once and trotted down the street and out of sight.

"Wow," Macy said.

"I hate dogs," I said.

"I don't like black dogs at night," John said. "They're too hard to see."

Then we were walking again. My adrenaline was really pumping good now. My mind was racing, and I could feel my body wanting to race with it.

We walked in silence—even the sirens had died down. I wondered where the dog had come from, where he'd gone off to, and if he planned on coming back. Every movement in the corners of my eyes became the dog, lunging for another attack.

I didn't really think he'd be back, though. When John had intercepted the dog and told him to leave, I had been keenly aware of some strange chemistry there. John hadn't even gotten excited. It was like he just *knew* he was going to make it through this without a scratch. And somehow I could sense that the dog had known, too. But whatever John's awesome self-confidence was, it wasn't contagious. I wasn't sure what Macy had been doing for the past few years, but I was suddenly aware that my own lifestyle had been severely sedentary. John could take care of himself. I could feel it. Macy *acted* like he could take care of himself. Maybe he even *thought* he could. And maybe that was enough. But I wasn't accustomed to a struggle to survive. I wondered about my physical ability to do so. I wondered if maybe it would come down to whether I wanted to survive more than whatever wanted to stop me.

I especially wondered if the desire to survive was enough. I doubted it. Do the mice *want* to survive any less than the cat?

I figured it was best to stick close to John and Macy.

By this time we had left the golf course behind and Encanto Park slowly scrolled past to the left of us. On our right a string of old houses ran along the road, lit with frequent streetlights and shaded with palm trees.

But I hardly noticed the buildings at all. My attention was firmly focused on the overweight jogger in gray sweat clothes loping toward us.

"What's he doing?" I asked, my voice low and urgent.

"It's a jogger. He's running," Macy said.

"No," John said. "It's a runner. He's jogging."

"No, I'm serious," I said emphatically.

"So's he," John said. "Serious about fitness."

"He must be," Macy said, "to be out here at two-thirty in the morning."

"No," I said. "Why is he out here now, at this time of night?"

"Maybe he came out to laugh at your shirt," Macy said.

"Maybe he knows what we're up to," I said, "and he's going to call the police and report our suspicious behavior."

We enjoyed a brief moment of silence.

"No," John said, "it's got to be your shirt."

### The Desert King

The jogger was close now. The suit he wore said "Arnie's Gym" on the front, but he couldn't have been a regular there. His chest was soaked with sweat around the words on the shirt and down to the bulge of his stomach. His slightly glazed eyes had the look of a horse ridden at full steam for ten miles. His stringy hair was cut short on the sides in a military style, dripping with sweat and matted to his head.

We moved a little to the right and he heaved past us on the left. Even walking on the right of John and Macy, I could smell the stale sweat on him.

"Wow," Macy said after the jogger had passed. "Quite an aroma."

"Like stale socks," I said.

"Yeah," John added. "Fished out of the canal."

We reached Encanto Boulevard and continued marching steadily southward toward the major street, McDowell Road.

"Why *was* that guy out jogging at night?" I asked. I didn't really think he was out to get us; it just seemed strange that he was out running so late—or so early.

"He probably just got up for work," John said, "and he'd rather jog now than in the heat of the day."

"A guy like that'd die runnin' during the day," Macy said.

That made sense. Even though it was probably eighty degrees now, the temperature soared up over one hundred ten degrees in the afternoon. Night was undeniably the best time of day to run in Phoenix.

But the jogger had reminded me of another concern.

"If the police start shooting at you, Macy," I said, "don't run where it's dark."

"Why not?"

"If you're in the dark," I said, "and the police shoot at the only part of you they can see ..."

"They'll blow that blond wig right off your head," finished John with a chuckle.

Macy was silent, thinking. We walked on. Past Encanto Park was a garden center, and past that we turned left down a side street. Macy continued thinking while we walked. We were in a residential area now. We had to walk on the street because there was no sidewalk. On each side of the street, a developer had sold mostly-identical brick houses. I saw no lights glowing in any of them.

As in my neighborhood, palm trees threw shadows everywhere, but this street was wider. I could feel the heat still coming off the blacktop from being in the direct sun all day.

"I'll just not get caught," Macy said finally.

"That would be my suggestion," John said. We passed through an intersection of streets marked with stop signs. On the other side, just out of reach of the streetlight on the corner, in front of the driveway of the house on the corner, we stopped walking.

Ahead of us was an empty lot big enough for a developer to plant a couple of houses. The wind picked up from the south, blowing dust and papers across the dirt. In the distance, lit even at this late hour, the skyscrapers on Central Avenue and Camelback Road rose from the horizon. Behind the buildings loomed the jagged form of Squaw Peak, one of the mountains the city had grown around.

John looked up and down the street and, satisfied at seeing nothing, pulled the revolver out of his pocket. He looked to Macy and me. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Macy nodded.

I said nothing. My breath had escaped me and it seemed I had lost my voice.

When John raised his arm and pointed the gun at Squaw Peak, though, I found it. "Hey," I said. "Isn't this dangerous?"

John lowered his arm and they both shot me irritated glances. The moonlight glinted in John's eyes. I could see that he had just about reached his limit. "Of course it's dangerous," he said. "That's why it's so much fun."

I sprang to clarification. "What I mean is—we're in downtown Phoenix. Those bullets are going to come down somewhere in the city. It's miles in any direction to uninhabited land."

John looked at Macy, and Macy shrugged at John, and suddenly they both started laughing. John held the revolver in front of his chest and looked at it. "Bullets fired from a .22 pistol," he said, "will go about two miles before hitting the ground." He raised his arm again and leveled the sights at Squaw Peak. "There's nothing moving up there this time of night."

That didn't help. "Squaw Peak's gotta be over five miles from here-"

The little gun boomed like a cannon in the quiet night.

He fired two shots, and both times my stomach almost jumped out of my mouth. I imagined the bullets screaming back to earth somewhere around Seventh Street, tinking through someone's living room window and punching through his *TV Guide* right into his chest. Instinct screamed *RUN!* through every nerve of my body.

Macy looked like he could read my mind. "That's the idea," he said, smiling slyly.

John shoved the smoking barrel back into his pocket and turned to me. "See you back at your place," he said.

And they were gone, sprinting different directions up the street, finding the patchy darkness between the streetlights and running through it.

I stood there, dazed, for a moment, smelling the gunpowder, seeing the gray puffs of smoke rising in the moonlight, hearing the sounds of the shots and their footsteps echoing and mixing with the ringing in my ears.

Then a light snapped on in the house on the corner and the dogs of the neighborhood started barking up a storm. My senses came back to me in a rush.

And I fled, finding the patchy darkness for myself.

### Chapter Two: Three Days Earlier

Three days earlier, I hadn't seen Macy Barnes in six years. When he walked in that Tuesday night, I didn't even recognize him at first. He walked through the door of Gridlock and stood just inside, like most people do, blinking and waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. I saw him come in, but I only recognized that he was not a regular. When his eyes finally adjusted, he walked over and sat down at the bar. He flashed a California smile and ordered a beer, and, because I was the weeknight bartender at Gridlock, I got it for him.

Gridlock was a small neighborhood bar on west Camelback Road in Phoenix. Buddy Robinson had named it "Gridlock" to keep away the party animals and to limit the crowd to a bunch of regulars who wanted a good place to relax with their friends after work. So at almost seven o'clock on Tuesday night, when Macy walked in, only a handful of regulars sat at the bar, and a pair of nurses from the VA hospital sat at a table in the back. The nurses stopped in frequently, but I wasn't sure of their names.

The single most important aspect of bartending, I'd learned, was customer service. Taking care of the patrons would earn you big tips and a steady crowd, if you did it right. With this in mind, I moved in to apply some considerate attention to the new stranger.

"What brings you to a bar named 'Gridlock'?" I asked.

His head snapped around like it was on a spring. He looked into my eyes, placing my voice. We recognized each other at the same time and started laughing. "Jack Trexlor," he said, "you old bastard. What the hell are you doing in Phoenix?"

I shrugged. "Just pushing drinks and pulling tips, I guess. Everybody's got to be doing something."

"That's true," he said, and laughed again. He took a sip of his drink and looked up at the place where the wall meets the ceiling. He sat there for a second, thinking. Then it was several seconds.

I chuckled. Same old Macy. It always did take him a minute to think for a second.

One of the nurses came to the bar for another pair of drinks. I poured them for her and watched her walk back to the table. She reminded me of someone else. Maybe it was the blonde hair.

"Last I knew you were up in...Kingman," Macy said, interrupting my thoughts. "I thought you'd never leave that place."

"Yeah," I said. "I had to get out of that town." This was true in more ways than I wanted to talk about. "Too many memories. Too much trouble. Too many...problems." I chose my words carefully. "I've been tending bar here about a year."

Macy laughed and shook his head and, perhaps expecting to see someone with a camera, looked around the bar quickly. I did too. There wasn't much to see. One of the regulars had staggered over to the nurses' table. He was saying something to them and they were shaking their heads politely. It was ordinary, but I didn't like it anyway. In the corner the jukebox glowed, droning out a song one of the nurses had played, a song by the Eagles about feeling peaceful.

Then Macy was talking again, diverting my attention from the nurses. "Whatever happened to your girlfriend there in Kingman? What was her name?"

"Diane," I said. Then I paused, trying to pick the right words. Someone said once that the difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between "lightning" and "lightning bug". I just try to be careful. "Don't tell me," he said, turning his head to look at me out of the corners of his eyes. "Don't tell me that somehow you and Diane went sour."

"Let's just say that I don't see eye to eye with a lot of people in Kingman anymore." It was a lightning bug of an understatement, true, but I didn't want to talk about the lightning. Not just yet.

"Shee-it," he said, shaking his head as the memories hit him. "I thought you and Diane were going to go the distance."

"So did I," I admitted.

"So what happened?"

The regular customer who'd been bothering the nurses was Eddy, a cab driver who worked the day shift and lived close by. At that moment he swayed back over to his stool and began wondering, rather loudly, who he had to know to get a beer in this town. I topped off his mug and got another scotch and water for one of his compatriots. When I got back to Macy, he was chuckling.

"I don't see you in..." he paused a couple seconds to think, then shook his head, giving up. "Years and years," he finished. "And suddenly you turn up in a corner bar—in Phoenix, of all places." He laughed again, and I did too, though we were laughing at different things. "What else you doing?" he asked. "You going to school? Studying to be a doctor or something?"

"No," I said. "This is it. Well, not really it. Sometimes I paint."

"Paint?" he asked. "You mean like houses?"

"No, usually landscapes and things. Paintings. Mostly realistic pieces, but sometimes abstract stuff. Some of it turns out okay, but most of it's just blah."

"Oh," he said, sounding rather disappointed. "How'd you get into that?"

"Well, I've been drawing since I was a kid, you know. Remember?"

I watched his face. He didn't seem to remember, though he should have.

"I got serious about art my senior year in high school, and I've been painting ever since."

Macy nodded thoughtfully. "Any money in that?"

I shook my head. "At least," I said, "not till you're dead."

Eddy was complaining again. This time he was commenting on how this would be a great place to open a bar. I got him another beer and refilled two of the quietly thirsty regulars.

"What have you been doing with yourself lately?" I asked, getting back to Macy.

His eyes lit up like a kid's at Christmas. "The desert," he said mysteriously.

"The desert?" I asked, not quite sure what he meant.

"The desert!" he said emphatically.

I didn't get it. "What's up in the desert?" I asked.

"Ah, man. Don't tell me you haven't been there."

"Been where? This is Phoenix. Arizona. It's all desert."

"Ah, man," he said. "You're missing out."

It was my turn to say something, but I was preoccupied. Eddy was back bothering the nurses again. They ignored him for a minute, but when he put a hand on one of their shoulders, he became rather difficult to ignore. When she brushed his hand off, he became adamant and intolerable—and bad for business.

"Eddy," I called to him.

He ignored me.

"Eddy!" I shouted. He looked up at me this time. "Why don't you leave them alone for a while and finish your drink at the bar?" I tried to say it politely, but it came out more like a demand. I could feel my blood beginning to run cold.

But Eddy backed down and lurched back to his bar stool. I watched him for a moment, then turned back to Macy. His eyes were still shining like the desert sun.

"What do you do there?" I asked.

"Everything, man. Fishing, hunting, swimming, name it."

"Where exactly is 'the desert'?" I asked.

"Usually we go up in the mountains in Tonto," he said, referring to Tonto National Forest, which lay northeast of Phoenix.

I tried not to let on that it didn't sound too great to me.

"Last weekend me and John were up there fishing," he said, "and John had this big ol' carp on his line, and he just about had it hauled in, when this hellgrammite flies up and bites him right on the back of his hand. Rip!" He laughed. "He dropped his pole and whoosh! That carp was gone! Dragging John's pole through the water behind him." He laughed more, remembering.

I was going to ask who John was or what a hellgrammite was, but I was distracted. "Excuse me a minute," I said.

Eddy was back at the nurses' table. I stepped around the end of the bar and went over to him. According to Arizona law, that kind of made me fair game for a fight, but I didn't much care. "Eddy," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder, "it's time to go home."

He turned and glared unsteadily at me. "Trexlor," he said, "leave me alone. I'm just being friendly to these girls here."

"No," I said calmly, "you're just going home. You've had enough to drink, and these girls don't want your company."

"Trexlor," he said, almost growling, "don't give me no shit. I'll fuckin' knock you back over that bar."

"Eddy," I said. "Go home."

For a second, I thought he was going to swing at me. And for a second, I was hoping he would. My hands shook and I had to consciously keep them from clenching. I could taste the adrenaline in my mouth. It had been quiet in the bar before, but now it was dead silent.

But Eddy backed down again. "Shit," he said. "This dump ain't worth it." He ambled over to the door and kicked it open. "Fuck you," he said back at us. "Fuck all of you." He slammed the door behind him and I watched as he walked by the windows out of sight. Then I started breathing again.

"Thank you," the blonde-haired nurse said to me. She wore her hair in a perm and I thought her name was Melissa, but I didn't want to chance it. "You're welcome," I said simply, then added, "Your next drinks are on the management."

Walking back to the bar, I noticed that none of the regulars had moved, except to turn around and look. Macy, however, was sliding back onto his stool. I cleared away Eddy's glass, wiped the bar where he'd been, and went back to Macy.

"That was nice work," he said.

I shrugged. "Drunks are bad for business."

Macy thought for a moment. "I thought you didn't like to fight," he said.

"I don't. But sometimes I just can't resist."

He nodded understandingly and I was glad when he changed the subject. "Are they friends of yours?" he asked, glancing back at the nurses.

"No, not really. They just stop in here now and then. They're nurses over at the Veteran's Hospital. A lot of regulars here work there."

Macy was lost in thought again. "I bet you get a lot of girls," he said, "being a bartender."

"Maybe now and then," I said. "Nothing spectacular."

Macy was obviously intrigued by the thought and thinking aloud. "A nurse gets stood up or...or maybe she comes in here with her boyfriend and he dumps her here. She drinks him out of her head. And you're here to be nice to her." He paused, waiting for me to respond.

"Shit happens," I said simply.

"Yeah," he said, still thinking aloud. "So you're Joe Nice Bartender and offer to give this poor, drunk, dumped girl a ride home. And then on the way there she gets all sentimental and mushy and pow!" He slammed his right fist into his left palm. "You nail her." "And another one bites the dust," I said flatly.

"Or the carpet."

"What happened to Sharon?" I asked, leading the conversation away. "Are you two still together?"

"Yep," he said. "We've been married for...years. In fact—" He looked up sharply. His eyes searched the wall above the back bar for a clock and found it. "Shit!" he said. "I'm late! I was supposed to pick her up at ten after seven." He drained his glass and slid off the stool. He extended his hand across the bar and I shook it.

"Congratulations," I said.

"For what? Being late?"

"For getting married."

"Oh. You didn't know? We sent you an invitation. I expected you to show up for the wedding."

"I never got the invitation."

"Maybe you already moved here," he said.

"Maybe," I lied.

"Hey," he said. "You going to be working here all night?"

"All by myself."

"Great. I'll go pick up Sharon and bring her back by. I know she'll want to see you."

I told him that sounded good to me.

He started laughing as he headed for the door. "Sharon's not going to believe this excuse," he said.

"I'll vouch for you," I said.

He smiled. "I'll be back in a little while," he said, and went out the door. He waved through the neon *OPEN* sign as he passed the window.

I waved back, wondering how long it would take Macy Barnes to be back in a little while.

### Chapter Three: Run Like Hell

The idea of the game was to attract the police, and guess who I ran into at the corner of McDowell and Eleventh.

Disturbing the peace.

That thought had been screaming through my head since John had fired the shots. I'd run for two blocks before I even realized that I was running *south*—away from my apartment.

And I was *running*. Only guilty people run so far away from gunfire. I stopped running and stood panting on the corner, feeling the perspiration wet on my calves and forehead, getting my bearings.

And that's when the police car drove by. For the briefest of moments, I wondered if they'd seen me running, if they were even responding to a call about the shots fired, if they were going after John and Macy.

Then the driver cranked the wheel hard left and threw the patrol car into a power slide, tires screaming, blue lights stabbing through the darkness, siren searing the night. The driver aimed the hurtling mass of chrome and lights back up the street at me. I wondered if they could really charge me with anything and if I should just stay put and tell them I didn't see anything.

But I wondered it while I fled up the street.

Resisting arrest.

I ran past the black and white police car as it screeched up to the curb. The officer riding shotgun leapt out as I flew by. He shouted *Halt!* at me, then I heard his footsteps about twenty yards back as he broke into pursuit.

Ahead of me, McDowell Road stretched on for miles. As I raced past Thirteenth Avenue with the policeman still huffing hot on my trail, however, I realized that it didn't matter how long McDowell ran on. I couldn't run that far. I would lose a footrace.

On my right, set back away from the road by a parking lot, was a shopping plaza. I cut through the lot and dodged between a couple of cars parked there. I didn't *stop* to wonder why they were still there in the middle of the night, but I did wonder. In the center of the plaza, an alley for trash pickup and merchandise delivery went between the buildings to the back lot. I glanced back just before I sprinted into it. The policeman had lost a few steps somewhere. Maybe he had stopped to wonder about the cars.

When I hit the rear of the building, I hung a sharp left and hid behind a dumpster, panting. Then, from nowhere, I had a flash of brilliance. With the patrolman's footsteps pounding closer, I looked through the trash in the top of the dumpster. For a change, luck was on my side. I picked up a beer bottle and heaved it as far as I could. Just as the policeman hove into view, the bottle smashed on the asphalt.

For an instant I could see his face in the moonlight, strained and angry. Then he was sprinting to where the bottle had smashed—away from me.

Ducking low, I ran the other way down the alley. It seemed to go on forever, but it was only about a hundred feet. As I reached the end, I could hear the policeman barking into his radio. I couldn't catch the words, but I guessed from his tone he was reporting that he'd lost me. I peeked out from the corner of the building. In the parking lot, the other patrolman stood in the open driver's side door of the patrol car, holding the radio microphone in one hand and looking around the plaza. Thirty or forty feet separated this building from the next one down the line, which had a similar back alley. I realized that even that refuge would be only fleeting, but I also knew that I had no other choice. I didn't even have the option to wait.

Watching the patrolman in the car, I wished I could tell where he was looking, but it was too dark. Looking across the parking lot at the next back alley, I wished that the distance was smaller, but the buildings weren't going to move. Thinking about the whole stupid game, I wished I'd never agreed to play, but—

I sprinted across the lot and into the back alley and along the back of the building as fast as I could go, not stopping or even looking back until I'd reached the other end. Then I looked around. Another parking lot lay between me and the street. On the corner, a sign told me this was Fifteenth Avenue. At this end, the parking lot was lit up like a baseball stadium. I was positive that I'd be surrounded by Phoenix police as I dashed across the parking lot and headed up the sidewalk beside Fifteenth.

But I wasn't.

Here, a veritable jungle of bushes and palm trees grew between the sidewalk and the houses. If any police came, I would be able to hide before they got to me—probably.

I trotted along, trying not to look suspicious, heading toward Encanto Park. Looking up and down the street, I happily discovered that I was alone for the moment. I slowed to a fast walk. In the distance a siren wailed. I wondered where Macy and John were. Even though this game had been their stupid idea, I still hoped that they fared better than I.

This was the street we had come down earlier. Now I recognized the street where we had turned and stopped and John had fired the gun. I was afraid to even look down the street. I hurried across. Once on the other side, still speeding up the sidewalk, I sneaked a glance back over my shoulder—just in time to see a police cruiser turning onto Fifteenth off McDowell.

I made it to the bushes just before their headlights flashed on the sidewalk. From my hiding place, I could watch them. They cruised slowly, probing their spotlight into the hiding places beside the road. My pulse throbbed in my throat. When they got to the street where we had turned, they turned also, heading back to the scene of the crime. Just before they disappeared from my sight, their spotlight played over the clump of bushes I was hiding in. For a second I knew I was caught and I was going to have to bolt.

But then they were gone, up the street and out of sight, and I breathed a small sigh of relief.

I leapt up from my hiding spot and ran up the sidewalk. I had to get some distance between me and the crime scene. I had to get back to my apartment. I wondered where John and Macy were. I wondered where the bullets had come down. I wished I knew the streets better so I could get off this big divider street. If I could make it to Thomas Road, I could—

A second before he hit me, I smelled him. He just lowered his head and shoulder into my side and tackled me. We tumbled off the sidewalk into the street.

He was the jogger we'd seen before, of course. I'd have recognized that smell anywhere. In the moment when we were falling, after he tackled me and before we landed on the pavement, I realized that he was the neighborhood hero I'd warned John about earlier.

We hit the asphalt in a pile of legs and arms. I lay on my left side and he was on all fours, trying to pin me down. But he lifted his head at the wrong time, and I snapped my right arm back, catching his nose with my elbow.

### First degree assault.

No, he attacked *me*. I was just running along, minding my own business, and he came flying out of the park and attacked me. Where's a self-defense witness when you need one?

When I elbowed his nose, he rolled off me a little and I jumped up. He sat back on his haunches, hands to his face. As I turned to run, he lunged and grabbed my right ankle. Down I went. With my left foot, I kicked his hands and he let go.

He was on his feet before I was, squared off toward me. His hair, already matted with sweat, now lay ruffled over his forehead. A thin stream of blood trickled from his nose. He wiped it off with the back of his sleeve. "You young punks," he said. "You're not going to get away with it this time. People in this neighborhood don't like your kind." The

#### The Desert King

tone of his voice was whiny and condescending and all at once it reminded me of my father's voice.

I detested my father.

I wanted to say that I wasn't a young punk, that it hadn't been my idea, that I'd tried to stop them, but I could tell I'd be wasting my time.

Suddenly he launched himself at me, charging like an ex-football star. He came at me with his head low, meaning to tackle me like he had the first time.

But this time I was prepared. After he had committed himself, I ducked as low as I could and hoped he didn't have time to react. He didn't. His legs came up against me with the rest of him above me against nothing, putting him off balance. When his body started to fall over me, I threw my forearm against his knees and heaved them as high as I could back over my head.

If he'd been a gymnast or a ninja warrior he might have had skill and training enough to complete the flip and land on his feet. None of that was his reality, however, and he thudded on his back on the asphalt.

Spinning around, I could tell he had the wind knocked out of him pretty good. His eyes were squinted closed, but if they'd been open he would have had an excellent view of the stars.

I didn't stop running until I got to Thomas Road.

At Thomas, I stopped running and hung a left, walking now. My own sweat was flowing freely by this time and I would have my own aroma, though probably not as pungent as that of the neighborhood hero.

We'd come down Fifteenth Avenue from Indian School, but I didn't want to go back that way. I was only about a mile from my apartment now. Many times after work I'd gone for a walk and wound up in this neighborhood. I knew the back streets here, and now I wanted to stay off the more significant ones. I knew my shirt should be easily remembered by police and neighborhood heroes alike.

I turned north on Seventeenth Avenue. The breeze had turned into a wind from the south. The monsoon was approaching and it looked like we were in for a storm tonight. Usually the monsoon storms didn't bring

### T. F. Torrey

much rain. Mostly the wind would kick up and drive a wall of sand across the valley. Sometimes the sand would get thick and sometimes it would rain afterward, but usually the storms merely blew some dirt around. At any rate, if I didn't get home soon I'd have sand down my back and in my eyes.

I kept looking back over my shoulder. Apparently the neighborhood hero had given up or gone for reinforcements. I wondered what the police strategy was or if they even had one.

I didn't wonder long. Halfway between Thomas and Indian School was Osborn, and just as I reached it, a police cruiser, spotlight blazing, crossed Seventeenth going west on the next street north. Apparently they were combing the residential streets, figuring that they were where I'd hide. They were right, but now I changed my strategy.

Hoping they didn't have a bunch of cruisers out looking, I hid in plain sight. I turned right on Osborn and I didn't see any police cruisers all the way back to Fifteenth Avenue. On Fifteenth I hung a left and again saw no cars. I was walking fast, but on the road where we'd been before, in plain sight. Hopefully no one would think to look there.

It was less than a half mile to my place now. If things went well, I'd be home inside of ten minutes. If things went—

Down I went, and as I was lying on my back, I thought that I had been stupid to leave the broomstick there on the sidewalk after I'd tripped over it the first time.

I got up and looked around. No one was there to laugh at me, and no police were there to arrest me. While I was dusting myself off, I realized that in a way I'd been lucky so far tonight. I'd fallen down on the sidewalk and been knocked down a couple times on the asphalt, but I didn't even have a bruise yet.

Then, from behind me, I heard the unmistakable scrabble of hard claws on concrete. I knew what it was even before I spun around.

The dog was back.

Ten yards and closing, running full tilt. No time to run, no place to hide. As he took his last few steps and leapt at me, I could hear his

### The Desert King

ragged breath and see the steady glint in his eyes. In the flash of a second, while he sailed through the air at my chest, I wondered where John was.

And I picked the broomstick up off the sidewalk.

He must have seen me swinging it up and lowered his head to try to dodge it. The end of the stick stabbed into his left eye. His momentum drove the stick deep into his eye socket. His weight ripped the stick from my grip, but in doing so knocked him away from me. He hit the sidewalk with an awkward flop, yelped, and shook his head. The stick rattled out into the street. I stood by, dazed, while the dog yelped again and pawed at his face.

Then he ran away, stopping every few yards to whimper and scratch at his face with his paw. He looked back at me once, and the mush oozing from his eye socket turned my stomach sour. I watched him go, feeling sorry for him even though I'd had virtually no choice. He'd been the one attacking me, but that didn't make me feel any better.

Finally he was gone out of sight, and I turned to finish walking home. I was close to Indian School Road now. Close to home.

Just then a patrol car crossed Indian School in front of me.

I quickly stepped off the sidewalk and behind a palm tree. Police cars all look the same, but I figured it wasn't the same one as before. They must have had at least two out, combing the main roads and the back streets. So I left both.

At my left was a service alley. Throughout the city, these overgrown gravel pathways separated the backyards of the houses on residential streets. Parallel to the side streets, these alleys had a trash bin at every house, serving to keep the garbage trucks from having to stop on the main streets. This one would serve to get me closer to my place without police observation. I figured that the police would rather lose me than search every service alley.

To isolate the homes from the alley and from each other, the developers had framed each with a four-foot-high chain link fence. Even though there was a gate at each yard, these were nearly always closed and usually locked.

I made my way quickly along the alley. The noise of my feet crunching on the gravel concerned me, because I didn't want to wake up dogs in the area. Even though they couldn't get me here, their barking would alert the police, or more heroes. I walked as quickly and as gingerly as I could. My breathing was still heavy and my damp shirt clung to me in places. I felt pretty lucky and confident by the time I'd made it halfway.

That's when I heard, soft and clear in the hot air, the anguished cry of a girl.

The sound came from the house to my left. A wide, low palm in the corner of the yard kept me from seeing the house, but the noise was not the kind I could ignore. I carefully moved next to the fence to where I could see past the tree.

There was a bit to look at. The fence contained a modest back yard, with short palm trees in the corners. A big red cooler sat by the back door, and at least a case of empty beer cans had been thrown past it out into the grass. The things in the back yard, however, got little of my attention.

My eyes and mind were drawn inside the house. The back door was open. Inside, lights I couldn't see lit the scene and cast a patch of light on the lawn outside the door. Against the far wall was a ragged couch with the girl on it. She was pretty, in an average kind of way. Dark hair, dark eyes. Young, perhaps in high school. She sat with her hands folded in her lap. She smiled, but it was a weak smile. The look on her face said she'd rather have been anywhere else. It wasn't difficult to see why. On each side of her, ugly oafs sat entirely too closely.

To the right, the swine with the brush cut, tank top, and indistinct tattoo had his arm tightly around her shoulders, and he kept pulling her closer. He was laughing intensely, but not so much as to take his mind off the girl. The rodent with greasy blond hair and a band T-shirt sitting

### The Desert King

on the other side of her was laughing, too, but appeared to be forcing it. His big left hand was spread out on her knee, and while he laughed he inched his hand up to her thigh.

Both were noticeably older than the girl, and I wondered for a moment how she came to be in their company in the first place. I didn't dwell on it.

On the coffee table in front of them, a half-empty bottle of what looked like tequila stood alongside a plate of what must have been sliced limes. An empty liquor bottle lay on the dirty brown carpet just inside the door. All three on the couch kept looking up at the space beside the door, the guys talking to people I couldn't see, the girl just looking unhappy.

As I watched, unseen, from my vantage point in the alley, the swine on the right laughed again, earnestly, smiling broadly at one of the people I couldn't see. The rodent smiled, but did not laugh. While he inched his left hand up the girl's thigh he reached his right hand up to touch the curls on her forehead. She pushed both of his hands away, and he grabbed her arm roughly.

He said a couple of words to her and deliberately put his left hand back on her knee. With his right hand he picked up the bottle and took a long drink. The swine smiled at her and said something to her with a *lighten up* look on his face. She lowered her head a little and bit her lower lip.

The swine accepted the bottle from the rodent and took a long drink himself.

I knew that the situation was about to get very ugly.

Some people can walk away from situations like that, saying it's the girl's own fault for being there in the first place, telling themselves that they're not her babysitter anyway. Most people just don't want to get involved.

I've never been one of those people.

I knew it didn't make any sense, an out-of-shape bartender taking on two or more guys on their own turf. It didn't matter. I'd been in similar

#### T. F. Torrey

situations before, and I knew that nothing was going to turn me around now. I wasn't leaving without the girl. Don't bother telling me the odds.

I could feel my heart beating in my chest, feel my blood running cold through my veins.

I grabbed the top of the fence with both hands, dug a toe into the mesh, and vaulted over the fence with a grace that surprised me. They neither heard me nor saw me as I walked through the dark yard to the door.

As I walked, the rodent on the right reached for the top button of the girl's blouse. She pushed his hand away, and the swine slapped her hard across the face. I stepped into the light just outside the door, and both oafs looked up at me, surprised and irritated. The girl lifted her head and looked at me, too. Her eyes were wet. Her dark hair fell around her face, but not enough to hide the blotchy red handprint on her cheek.

"Hello," I said calmly. "You guys havin' a party?"

The rodent who had reached for the girl's blouse stood up, a bit unsteadily, stepped over the coffee table, and walked over to stand just inside the door.

"Who the fuck are you?" he challenged.

"I just dropped in to take the girl home," I said.

He stepped closer, into the doorway. "What the fuck are you talking about?" he demanded.

I hadn't realized how big this guy was when he was sitting down. He was something over six feet tall and a lot over two hundred pounds. Suddenly the people I hadn't been able to see stepped in behind him, looking to see what all the conversation was about.

The situation was, indeed, turning very ugly.

The two new guys looked to be Mexican or of mixed descent. Judging from their builds and their tank tops, they spent a lot of time working out. They could have been professional tag-team wrestlers. Together they must have weighed over five hundred pounds. They were roughly the same height as me, six feet or a little under, and I guessed their ages to be early thirties. They looked enough alike to have been brothers, but their faces were shaped differently. One of them had a broad, wide face, the other's was all squashed together, like he was on the verge of exploding into a fat guy. Wide-face and Squash. They weren't twins, but they seemed to be relatives. Their standing in the doorway blotted out the pool of light outside the door, leaving me in darkness. I couldn't see their expressions because their faces were silhouetted against the light, but I sensed their irritation.

I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck, and I wasn't scared. "I came to give the girl a ride home," I said again.

"Yeah?" the oaf in the door said. "Well she don't wanna go home now." He reached to the right of the door and snapped on the outside light.

We studied each other for a second. His greasy hair, dumpy attire, and overall grimy appearance told me he was more likely to be working for minimum wage than attending college, though I doubted he was very impressed with me, either.

"Why don't you let her decide if she wants to go?" I asked, although I knew there was no chance.

"Why don't you leave now?" he asked. He paused for dramatic effect, then added, "Before you get hurt."

I felt my jaw set. "I'm not leaving without the girl," I said. "She deserves better than you jerks."

When you choose to criticize, someone wise once said, you choose your enemies. I had made my choice. Good or bad, right or wrong, I had just chosen my enemies.

Run? Like hell.

### Chapter Four: Macy and Sharon

It turned out that it took my old friend almost four hours to be back in a few minutes. He hadn't changed a bit. I had first met Macy back when I was a young teenager and my parents had decided to start living singly again. My father was a surgeon, and apparently the nights and days he spent at the operating table gave him plenty of time to grow apart from my mother. After they split up, he moved to Grand Terrace, California, eventually starting his own cosmetic surgery practice. I stayed with my mother in Kingman, Arizona, until I was done with high school, but I spent the summers at my father's house in southern California, and that's where I met Macy Barnes.

He lived in the house right next to my father's, and in the three summers before I graduated, Macy and I became good friends. Both he and Sharon were a year younger than I. He was going out with her then, and they had *plans*. After they graduated, they were going to get married and Macy was going to work in some lofty position in Sharon's father's restaurant business. Though Macy's own parents wanted him to go to college, I thought that Macy's plans were ambitious enough, for him. I thought he would have a tough time in college.

Sharon, however, was another story. She had beautiful, long, brunette hair, deep brown eyes, and a trim figure. When I had first met her, I'd had trouble keeping my eyes off her. After I got to know her, however, I'd found that her personality more than counterbalanced her looks. She was always pessimistic, usually abrasive, and frequently downright rude. More than that, she always struck me as a quitter. In that respect she was the exact opposite of Macy. While she always seemed to quit as soon as things got rough, Macy was the pinnacle of persistence.

When they walked in together, I was both surprised and not surprised. Macy would never quit Sharon, and although she might sometimes want to quit him, deep down she was as scared as anyone, and she would never dare to brave the world on her own. That was okay. They both could have done a lot worse.

Sharon looked pretty much the same as I remembered. At about five feet, six inches tall, she stood about three inches shorter than Macy. Her wavy, dark brown hair fell about her shoulders in a medium length cut. Her piercing dark brown eyes still held the indifference I remembered. The only real change was in how old she looked. She was the same age as Macy, but when I had last seen her, she had possessed the fresh face of a teenager. Now she had lost that youthful glow, and her face had taken on the edges of a woman. All in all, though, she was still beautiful.

As they walked up to the bar, I stepped around the end of it to the stool side. Sharon had always been a hugger, and I figured she'd want to give me a huge hug like she'd done when we met and parted those summers in California.

Macy beamed at me. "See, Sharon, I told you," he said.

I held my arms open in preparation for the hug.

Sharon walked coolly past me and sat down on the bar stool. "Hello, Jack," she said with her back to me.

Somewhat taken aback, I looked questioningly at Macy. He stopped beaming, shrugged, and took the stool next to her. Resuming my position behind the bar, I said, "Hello, Sharon. You look fantastic."

She met my eyes briefly, then looked away.

"Thanks," she said. Her voice said she was uncomfortable about me. I hoped I didn't know why. She plopped her purse on the bar in front of her.

"Uh, yeah," I said.

"Uh, yeah!" Macy said, trying to lift the mood. "Couple of beers, Jack?"

"Sure, Macy," I said. "Draft okay?"

"Sure," he said, smiling. I filled two glasses quickly and put them in front of Sharon and Macy. Macy was smiling and beaming.

Sharon wasn't. "Oh, Macy!" she said. "Why did you do that? You're so stupid. You know I can't drink that!"

Macy had picked up his glass for a drink and her verbal onslaught almost made him drop it. He mumbled something vaguely apologetic and slid her beer over in front of himself.

"Sure, drink both," Sharon said.

"Wait a second!" I almost shouted. This wasn't quite the Macy and Sharon I remembered. "Sharon," I said, "*why* can't you drink a beer?"

She looked at me like I was stupid. "Because I'm pregnant!"

I was surprised. I looked at Macy. He grinned sheepishly and took a long drink of beer. "Well, congratulations," I said. "Excuse me a second."

I walked down the length of the bar to see if any of the regulars needed a refill and to think. This wasn't the Macy and Sharon I remembered. I wondered if they had just grown sick of each other, or if Sharon had just grown sick of Macy, or if it was something else. Maybe pregnancy had done this to her. When I returned to their end of the bar, Macy was still saying apologetic things to Sharon.

"Congratulations," I interrupted. Sharon met my eyes briefly then looked away at the back bar.

"Thanks," she said flatly, not exactly a proud mom-to-be.

I thought I saw a way out of this uncomfortable situation. I poured a peace offering of sorts and placed it on the bar in front of Sharon, saying, "In honor of your maternity, the management would like to buy you this Coke."

There began a long pause. At first she acted like she hadn't heard me. I looked at Macy, who raised his eyebrows back at me. Sharon looked at the walls, her hands, her purse. Then finally she slid the glass closer to herself and looked at me. "Thank you," she said politely,

#### The Desert King

perhaps even with a note of friendliness. I noticed Macy breathing a little sigh of relief.

Then she added, "Nice to see *somebody* can do something nice for me for a change."

Macy ignored her as best he could.

"So," I said to Sharon, "when's the big day?"

Sharon shrugged, looking into her Coke. "Don't know yet."

"She goes to the doctor next week," Macy explained.

"Oh," I said.

There followed another uncomfortable silence. I was afraid to choose a topic because it seemed like everything would set Sharon off. From the way Macy shifted on his stool, he was also trying to find a topic she would approve of. Sharon coolly sipped her Coke, managing to exude an air of personal distaste for everything in general in the process.

Macy's face lit up. "Hey, honey," he began, "why don't you tell Jack about that carp you caught last weekend out in the desert?"

Sharon rolled her eyes. "God, Macy, that's all you ever talk about. The desert. And John Lupo. John Lupo and the desert." She sipped furiously at her Coke. "Where's the bathroom, Jack?"

I tipped my head toward the far end of the bar. "Down there."

She slid off her stool and walked away, saying she'd be back in a few minutes. As she disappeared through the door, Macy washed down the last of his beer and looked at me, shaking his head.

"It's going to be a long nine months," I said.

"More like seven, now, but sheesh," he said, nodding resignedly.

Conversation flowed easily between Macy and me, but I paused long enough to clear away his first empty glass before continuing. "You took her out into the desert, even though she's pregnant?"

"Of course," he said.

I frowned at him. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Naw," he said, "It's not that bad."

"The desert? Isn't that bad?"

Macy shook his head impatiently. "Dude, man, I'll tell you. John delivered his youngest son out there. Right up north of Horseshoe Lake."

"No," I said.

"It's true," he said. "Right up there underneath Sheep Bridge."

I was incredulous. "I've lived in Phoenix for several years and I've never heard of such a thing."

"Man, I swear it. She went into labor early and that's where they were so he just did it. Cut the umbilical cord with his boot knife."

"What about snakes and ... and scorpions and stuff?"

He shook his head again disdainfully. "Hardly ever see 'em." He took a sip of his second beer, the one I'd set up for Sharon. "Besides, John'd take care of 'em. John Lupo's deadlier than *anything* in the desert, man." His eyes were glowing with this talk. "First time he took me out in the desert," he said, "John was standing in the river spear fishing, and this deer came out of the trees behind us." He was shaking his head in his own disbelief. "He heard that deer and turned around and heaved his spear right through its heart before I even knew what was going on. Dropped him right there."

"No," I said.

"Yup," he said. "Took that bastard out with a fishing spear twenty yards away." He was shaking his head and nodding at the same time—a neat trick if you can pull it off.

"Who's John...uh...what's his last name?"

"Lupo," he said. "John Lupo. He's my boss."

"But I thought that you..."

"Yeah," he said, the glow disappearing from his eyes. "That kind of fell through." He took another slug off his beer.

"What happened?" I asked. "Sharon's dad go bankrupt or something?"

"Worse. He died."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, Sharon's mother didn't know nothing about running the business, so she put Sharon's dickhead brother in charge of everything, and that jerk didn't know nothing either, so I quit."

"Oh," I said, sure that there was more to the story. "Still, Grand Terrace is a long way from Phoenix. How'd you end up here?"

He sighed a little. "Things got pretty ugly there in California. I-we-just wanted to get as far away as possible, to start over on our own."

"And this is as far as you could get? There's lots of places farther than this. St. Louis, Oklahoma City, New York ..."

"Not that far," he said. "They won't bug us here. That's what I care about."

"Well," I said. "I'm sorry to hear that that didn't work out for you. It was pretty promising."

He made a sour face. "Well, I'm not sorry. Dude, until I went to the desert, I didn't know what living was."

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"You know," he continued, "all while I was growing up in California, that wasn't really living. That was more like just—pushing buttons. Just do this for this and that for that and go here and go there and go home. You know?"

I didn't.

He attempted to explain. "Out there in the desert, man, you feel so small. I mean, you got miles and miles of mountains and cactus plants and all the time the sun's beating down on you and you can't just sit back and relax, you have to survive if you want to live. And when you do, it's like the desert gives you some kind of respect."

I still didn't get it. "I see," I lied.

"No, man." He shook his head and tried again. "In the desert, if you don't *actively* survive, you'll die. The snakes and scorpions and cactuses will get you. Or worse—the sun. Just to exist out there, you're conquering the elements. You deserve to live *because you're still alive!*" I frowned thoughtfully. Some aspect of the desert had clearly struck a chord inside Macy. I still didn't understand, but it felt mystic and primeval.

"Out there, man," he said, looking straight into my eyes, trying to project some depth or emotion. "Raw power and beauty." He waved his hand in the air between us as if wiping a slate clean of all of humanity. "Absolutely raw."

Things were entirely heavier than I was used to. "Excuse me," I said, and went to serve some refills to the other customers. By this time, there were only a couple of regulars left in the bar. Sharon came back while I refilled them, and as I was walking back down the bar to Macy and Sharon's stools, Macy headed off to the rest room. I topped off Sharon's Coke while she settled onto her stool.

"Sorry to hear about your dad," I said.

"No biggie," she lied. Her eyes told another story. "It's sad though that he won't get to see his grandchild."

"It also stinks that Macy quit at the restaurant," I said.

She flashed me a *he-told-you-that*? look. "My brother fired him," she said. "Macy acted like my brother didn't know anything about running the business and that just wasn't so. My brother went to four years of college—for that—and then Macy wanted to tell him how to run everything."

"I thought your brother went to college for dancing or something," I said.

"Performing arts," she corrected. "But he also took courses in business."

I said nothing. It seemed disagreement enough by itself.

"So after a while my brother just got tired of Macy working against him and so he fired him."

I couldn't think of a way to agree, so I said nothing.

Then she surprised me. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

"Tell him what?" I was afraid I already knew, but I had no idea how *she* had found out.

"Jack!" she said, starting to fume. "How you—you *tortured* that guy!"

"Keep your voice down," I said. "Nobody here knows anything about that, and no one's going to. It's part of the past, and I want to keep it that way."

"You're an asshole," she said.

"Why? Because I made a few mistakes and I don't want everybody to know about them?"

"Macy's your friend," she said. "Don't you think he deserves to know the truth about his so-called 'friends'?"

"Jesus, Sharon, I haven't seen Macy in years. I'm not going to start right out telling him how I tortured some guy a long time ago. How did you find out, anyway?"

She sighed and pouted and sipped her Coke. "I called your mom to invite you to the wedding. She told me what you did and said you were at that mental hospital."

"Great!" I said disgustedly. "You never told Macy?"

"No," she said. "It would have broken his heart. You know how he looked up to you."

"So he still doesn't know?"

"No."

"Good." I sighed deeply. "I'll tell him. Later. In my own way."

She shook her head.

"Look," I said. "I already lost about every friend I ever had because of this. I'll tell him, but not just yet. Later."

"Maybe I should just tell him," she said.

"No!"

Macy was coming back from the bathroom now.

"Please?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"Hey, hey!" Macy said, slipping back onto his stool.

Sharon looked straight into my eyes for a moment, apparently deciding whether to tell Macy or to let me tell him. Then she lowered her eyes and forcefully stifled a yawn. "Macy," she said, "I'm tired. We should go home after you finish your beer."

Macy nodded a little.

I didn't know what that meant. Maybe she was going to tell him and maybe she wasn't.

"Hey, Jack," Macy said, "where are you living now?"

"South of here, down by Indian School," I said.

"That's not too far," he said. "We don't live far from here, either. Just up by Bethany Home and Seventh Avenue."

Sharon, of course, looked bored and tired, but Macy and I were both momentarily surprised and impressed. Our apartments, from which we'd had all of the Valley of the Sun to choose, were located within two miles of each other. Whether it was by coincidence, fate, or just weird luck I often wondered later. We exchanged exact addresses and phone numbers.

"I'll give you a call, man," Macy said. "You can drop in for one of Sharon's famous Italian dinners."

"Sounds great," I said, although right then it didn't.

"And next time we take a trip to the desert I can give you a call and you can go, too," Macy said.

"Oh, please," Sharon said disgustedly.

"Sounds great," I lied.

Macy downed the rest of his beer and stood up, extending his hand across the bar to me. "Nice seeing you again, Jack."

"I'm glad we ran into each other again," I said, taking his and shaking it firmly.

"Feel free to call me anytime," he said. "You know, if there's anything you want."

"Or if there's anything you want to get off your chest," Sharon interjected.

"Thanks," I said, discreetly glaring at Sharon. "You feel free to do the same."

As they got to the door, Macy turned around and said, "I'll see you soon, Jack. You know how things come up."

"Yeah," I said.

Macy exited smiling and waving through the OPEN sign.

It was just a few days later that I found out what kind of "things" came up in Macy's life.

## Chapter Five: The Princess and the Fool

I took a step back from the doorway. The oaf stepped toward me. I tried to think of something to say. There was nothing. These guys had likely been drinking all day, and the time for reasoned discussion with an intruder was long gone.

I took another step backward. The oaf took another step toward me, but his step was unsteady, and he glanced at the ground like maybe it was shifting on him. Alcohol will surprise you like that.

That was my edge. It had to be.

I stepped back again, and just as the oaf lifted his foot to step toward me, I swung. My fist impacted his jaw and he dropped to one knee. I felt a surge of premature triumph well up in my chest. In the split second where I could have acted, I did nothing, feeling somehow like I'd already won.

From one knee, he launched himself shoulder-first into my abdomen, knocking me backward. He continued the thrust, and I fell to the ground. He fell on top of me, landing with his knee just above my belt. With the pain in my stomach and the sandy ground on my back came the reality of the situation.

Things looked grim.

I rolled the guy off me. He was too unsteady to resist much. We scrambled to our feet, crouched and squared against each other, arms out low in front.

And over his shoulder, between the Mexican tag team duo, I saw the girl, still on the couch with the other oaf. We locked eyes for just a second. Her expression showed the gratitude of the princess for the fool. She was glad that I had stood up for her, but—she knew they'd ride my body out into the desert somewhere, and ride hers all over the carpet.

No. As long as there was life in my body, I'd never let that happen.

Unfortunately for both of us, that might not be much longer.

The oaf lunged at me again, reaching out with both arms and stepping off with his left foot. But I didn't feel like wrestling. I nimbly stepped outside his foot and caught his left arm, using his momentum and his sleeve to throw him to the ground beside me. He landed on all fours and I kicked him as hard as I could in the stomach. And before he could collapse to the ground I kicked him fiercely in the face. He tipped over onto his right side, blood running through his fingers as he clutched his nose.

I didn't have time to admire my work. The tag team duo was in motion. I spun to face them as they stepped into the yard. Yeah. Two of them. One of me. Probably three times my weight. Think of something. Fast. Now. I took a couple of steps backward. They didn't say anything, either to me or to each other. It was quiet inside and out. The silence was ominous.

They acted like they'd rehearsed this many times. As they moved toward me they split up, Wide-face to my left and Squash to my right. Their eyes were steady and calm, business-like. "What did you do today, Jose and Pepe?" "Oh, you know, we just fed a guy his ears and toes. You know, nothing special."

If I ran now, if I vaulted back over the fence, I could call the police and—and what? They were probably already looking for me, and these guys could just say I'd come in and started trouble. But the girl could vouch for me! But that didn't help any for the gunshots. Or Arnie's hero. And if I left and didn't call the police, the girl would still pay.

At the middle of the yard, I stopped retreating. There stopped being a point to it. Now they had moved so that I was directly between them. If I broke for the fence now they'd nail me. If I stayed where I was—

Suddenly I let out a yell and rushed toward Squash with my hands raised to face level, like I was going to grab his throat.

He fell for it.

He watched my hands all the way, raising his own to defend himself. At the last second I kicked him as hard as I could in the groin. He grunted and doubled over.

And I was a crazy man. I punched his ear and kicked at his leg and dropped both fists into an overhead smash onto the back of his neck with all the vigor I could muster. Still, in those fractions of seconds of my onslaught, I wondered how much a relatively sedentary bartender *could* muster. Almost in answer to these secret musings, Squash flopped squirming onto the grass.

And a blinding white pain pounded into my right temple. I didn't know if I'd been kicked or punched. I wasn't thinking at all. My entire reality consisted of a great white pain with little gray flecks through it. Then a brief falling sensation. My senses came back from their brief journey just in time to feel the hard ground under my left elbow and a painfully angular beer can crushed under my left hip.

I clambered to my feet—no time for pain. Squash was climbing to his feet and Wide-face was closing in for another swat. I backed up a couple of steps for time.

Wide-face swung hard at my head. I whipped my head back instinctively, feeling the breeze on my nose. Hot blood trickled down my face from my temple. He stepped forward and swung again. Again I yanked my head back in time. But just as I took a step backward I realized that I was backing up toward the house.

And I felt a huge arm clamp around my throat from behind. I kicked my left leg back and tried to curl out, but it was to no avail. The arm around my throat tightened and pulled me up straight. A hand grabbed my elbow while I struggled for breath and freedom.

Wide-face strode calmly toward me, smiling and rubbing the knuckles on his right hand with the fingers of his left. Behind him, Squash brushed himself off, not smiling—cold, intense, and more than a

little angry. But I didn't see either one of them, because just then I noticed a figure vaulting the chain link fence, silhouetted in the light of the moon and the streetlights. The figure wore an outback hat.

John Lupo dropped inside the fence behind Squash.

"Hey!" he said, his voice not quite a shout.

The Mexicans whirled around, and I felt the grip on my throat and arm tighten.

"I'll give you one chance to let my friend go," John said.

If I could have breathed, I would have told him to save his breath and start punching.

"Or what?" Wide-face asked.

It didn't matter what John's answer would have been. Squash was giving his reply in actions, not words. He walked toward John Lupo.

By sight the situation still looked hopeless. Squash was as a full head taller than John and outweighed him by at least a hundred pounds. Hell, *I* was bigger than John was. Behind Squash stood Wide-face, every bit as big as his friend. And to make matters worse, the dark-haired oaf had finally gotten off the couch and come outside. He had the empty tequila bottle in his hand, and after he smashed it against the door frame, he was wielding a lethal weapon.

But still John stood at ease, his outback hat slung low. From the shadows under the brim, his eyes flashed calm and cool, almost indifferent. He still had that air of collected control.

Squash wasn't impressed. He stepped in and swung the pork roast that was his right hand at John Lupo's face.

John stepped in, caught the fist with both hands, turned and pulled the arm across his chest, and, as he pulled Squash off balance, smashed him twice in the nose with his elbow. With his right foot John kicked into the side of Squash's knees, and just like that Squash was lying on his back on the ground, holding both hands up to his bloody nose.

Even after the dog scene, I was impressed.

Wide-face wasn't. He approached John cautiously, but confidently. After all, he was still a giant compared to John.

John walked straight at him, leaving no false hope for anything but physical confrontation.

Wide-face raised his hands as if to box, then, just when John got into range, kicked hard with his left foot at John's ribs.

Unlike Squash had been, John wasn't fooled at all. Moving slightly to his left, he caught the kick, neat as whiskey, under his right arm. Wideface's arms flailed wildly as he struggled to keep his balance, but John lifted the leg and thrust forward. Wide-face hopped once, then tipped over onto his back, but even as he fell, John kicked him twice in the groin. Then he let go of the leg, leaving Wide-face groaning and writhing on the ground, and strode calmly toward the dark-haired oaf with the broken bottle.

Just then the grip on my throat eased ever so slightly, and likewise the grip on my left elbow let up just a little.

Just a little was all I needed. I wrenched my arm free and elbowed back as hard as I could, catching my holder in his ribs. And again. And again.

The arm around my throat relaxed and I broke free, whirling and going crazy again. I punched his fat face and I punched his ugly stomach. I punched again at his bloody face—

And he caught my fist and hit me so hard in the throat I thought for sure that precious swallowing was a thing of the past. He hit me above my left eye and I fell back onto one knee. Without a break he kicked out at my head. I raised my arms to block the kick. Then something amazing happened: I got lucky.

The force of his kick against my arm whipped my hand, wrist, and forearm around his shinbone. Suddenly, I had ahold of his leg. And taking a cue from John, I lifted and lunged. He fell backward as I threw my right forearm across his throat and slammed him against the wall of the house. His head hit the bricks, and I stepped in and kneed him hard in the groin. Twice I pounded his jaw with my left fist, then stepped back suddenly, gripping his shirt and slamming him face-first into the ground. He rolled over onto his back and tried to figure out which part to hold in pain.

I whirled to see the other oaf slashing the broken bottle at John Lupo. He swung viciously across right to left, then stepped forward and slashed back across. John stepped backward, just out of range, hands low, still with that sense of control in his eyes.

The oaf stepped and swung, but as he did John swayed back, caught the wrist with his right hand, and pulled the arm out straight while stepping in to the side. With fluid grace and rocket speed, he smashed his left forearm against the back of the elbow. I could almost hear the grind of bone and the tearing of ligaments as the attacker's arm bent the wrong way out of control.

The oaf dropped the bottle, but before it even hit the ground, John punched his jaw and kicked his legs out from under him. He fell into a whimpering heap beside the bottle.

Then, suddenly, it was quiet again—well, as quiet as it gets in Phoenix. The four offenders lay on the ground around us, some of them moaning a little, some of them muttering curses and challenges. Somewhere off in another part of the city a siren howled, but for the first time that night I didn't think it howled for me.

The noise I noticed loudest was my own shallow breathing. John stood a few feet from me, and I was momentarily impressed that he didn't seem to be breathing hard. What impressed me more was that through it all his hat had stayed firmly, effortlessly, in place on his head. He glanced all over quickly, then headed for the back fence, saying, "Come on, Jack, let's get while the getting's good."

"Wait!" I said.

He stopped and spun toward me, alert for any new challenge, his eyes glinting from the shadows under his hat.

"What about the girl?" I asked.

"What about her?"

I glanced—and he did, too—at the back door of the house. The girl had gotten up off the couch during the scuffle, and now she stood meekly in the doorway. "We can't just leave her here," I said.

John looked at me patiently. "What do you think we should do?"

"I don't know," I said. "Take her with us?"

"Take her with us? To your place? To work every day? Out to the river on weekends?" He shook his head. "You haven't even met her yet, and you've already appointed yourself her guardian?"

I shrugged rather resignedly and looked at the girl, but I didn't say anything.

John stepped toward me, turning to make sure that she could also hear his words. "Look," he said. "We can't take her with us, and we can't follow her everywhere to keep her out of trouble. If she's got any sense at all she'll leave, now, while she has the chance. Like we're going to."

I looked to see her reaction, but she was already gone out of the doorway. She extracted her purse from somewhere and put it over her shoulder. As she headed out to the front of the house, she looked back at me. Though she spoke too softly for me to hear, she unmistakably mouthed the words: "Thank you." Anyway, I saw it plainly in her eyes.

John was already back over the fence, waiting impatiently for me to follow. I climbed over the fence myself, then we were walking quickly over the gravel of the service alley.

Suddenly I wondered and I asked, "How did you—how did—why were—how did you manage to come in like that? Just in time."

He laughed, an easy laugh, tilting his head back. "It was magic," he said.

I didn't know what to say. At the time it had seemed really handy. Now it seemed really strange. Still, I didn't think it was magic.

He was smiling. "Well, it must look like magic, until you find out how it was done."

"Yeah," I agreed.

He said nothing.

"So," I said, "how was it done?"

"Well, I followed you."

I waited while he found some more words.

"After I fired the shots, I noticed that you were running the wrong way," he said. "You were too far away for me to catch you, but I figured that you'd see that you were going the wrong way and come back."

"Which I did."

"Yeah, so I stopped off in Encanto Park and waited for you to come by." He laughed again. "Then that jogger nailed you." He was lost in laughter now.

"And you didn't help," I said pointedly.

"There was no need," he said, stopping laughing. "You took care of him pretty well, I must say."

My chest, or my head, swelled a little with the compliment.

We reached the end of the gravel alley and looked up and down Nineteenth Avenue. Seeing no police cars or anything, we headed north. Nineteenth is another of the mile-block roads of Phoenix, flanked on both sides by commercial plazas. Indian School was in sight a quarter mile ahead of us. We walked briskly on the sidewalk.

"I stayed out of sight when you ran by," John continued. "Then I followed you a ways back while you took those side streets."

"Why didn't you just walk with me?" I asked.

"Simple," he said. "I wanted to see if you'd make it without me."

I thought about that for a moment. It rather galled me to be so clearly patronized. It suddenly occurred to me that the entire evening might have been set up as a test—of me.

"When the dog came back, I thought you were a goner," he continued.

"I didn't have time to think."

"But I was impressed," he said. "You did what you had to do, and you made it. That was really good thinking." My chest didn't swell this time. "I felt kind of bad for the dog," I admitted.

"Well," he said, then he paused. "I almost did, too. But you remember that he made the choice to attack you. That was his decision. When he chose to attack you he chose to deal with however it turned out."

"Well," I said reluctantly.

"Well, nothing," he said. "You always have the right—no, the *obligation*—to defend yourself to the best of your ability. The responsibility for the attack lies with the attacker. The dog. He was responsible for what happened to him."

"Still, I chose to defend."

"As opposed to what?" he asked.

We walked on in silence. At Indian School Road we hung a right. It was less than an eighth of a mile to my place now. Still we saw no police and no heroes.

"Back there was a different story," John said, continuing. "I got to that gravel road just in time to see you hop the fence. What were you doing there, anyway?"

"Well, you know, the girl wanted to leave, and, they, uh, they wanted her prone, so I just helped her out."

"You just helped her out?"

"Yeah," I said.

"How did you know she wanted to leave? Did she tell you?"

"No, she didn't *tell* me." I didn't like this interrogation. "She just sat there with an *I-want-to-leave* look on her face. She didn't even know I was there."

"So you chose to attack her four friends?"

"No. There was no choice to it. She wanted to leave. They wanted to make her stay. I was there, so I helped her. I couldn't just turn my back on her, whether she knew I was there or not. Would you have done any different?"

He was calm. "Did I?" he asked.

"Did you what?"

He sighed. "I got to the fence when you were talking to that first dude. Then a minute later you were in trouble. Did I turn my back on you?"

"No."

"But that's different. I know you. You didn't know the girl."

"Well, that's not different to me. I can't just turn my back on situations like that, whether I know the people or not."

"I know what you mean," he said. We were silent again for a while. "You would have done all right if there had only been two of them," he pointed out.

"Yeah," I said, "but there were four of them. Thanks."

He shrugged. "It was fun," he said simply.

We crossed Indian School and headed up Eighteenth Avenue. My place was right around the corner now.

"It wouldn't have been so much fun," John said contemplatively, "if they had pulled out a gun."

That struck me as odd. Then I thought about it and it seemed even odder. "Hey," I said. Then I said it again. "Hey! Why didn't you just pull out *your* gun?"

"I didn't want to shoot it," he said.

"You wouldn't have had to," I insisted. "You could have just waved it around and scared them while we got away with the girl."

He shook his head. "Nah," he said. "This gun's too little to scare big guys like that. They would have just laughed, and then I would have had to pull the trigger."

"What do you mean?"

He patted his pocket where the gun was. "This gun's little. They'd look at it and think it was too little to hurt them, like some kind of BB gun or something."

"But it would still take them out if you shot them."

"Sure, bullets are mean things. But I didn't want to shoot it. You wave around a big gun if you don't want to shoot. You wave around a little gun, and you just might have to."

I nodded thoughtfully. "Still," I said, "they come at you. You shoot them. Self defense. I'm your witness."

He was shaking his head and smiling. "No, I couldn't have shot them."

I was confused. This master of survival couldn't shoot someone to defend himself? "What do you mean, you couldn't have shot them?" I asked. "All that talk about the attacker making the choice to deal with the results ..."

He was smiling broadly. "Jack," he said, "it's only got blanks in it."

I was dumbfounded.

All that. All that worrying about the bullets coming down in the city. All that worrying about the police tracking me down as an accomplice to homicide. All that—for nothing.

"Sure was fun, though, wasn't it?" he asked, grinning like a lunatic. We were back at my place.

### Chapter Six: Friday Before and After

It hadn't taken long for something to come up. It had been Tuesday when Macy and Sharon first came to Gridlock. Based on previous experiences and current trends, I hadn't expected to see Macy again for several weeks. I was quite surprised when he dropped back into Gridlock on what would have otherwise been a dull Friday night that same week.

I was immediately suspicious. Few people dropped into Gridlock at twelve-thirty on any day of the week, and none of them looked particularly well-rested. Macy was both. His step was quick and light as he practically pranced over to the bar and hopped up onto the stool. If he hadn't been so cheerful, I would have suspected that Sharon had narced. Instead, I suspected she hadn't. The night had just become interesting.

"Hey, hey, Jack!" he said.

"Macy!" I returned. "Can I get you a beer?"

"Love one."

Again Macy and I were practically alone in the bar. Five people sat at two tables in the back. No one sat at the bar. I had been watching an old *Perry Mason* episode on TV when he came in. Now I turned my attention to Macy.

"What's going on tonight?" I asked as he put down his glass.

He tried hard to look surprised. "What makes you think something's going on?"

"Are you saying that nothing's going on tonight?"

"No," he said, smiling, "I'm just wondering what makes you think so."

I leaned forward and rested my elbows on the bar, counting off the points on my left hand. "First," I said, extending my index finger, "it's almost closing time, and *nobody* but a hardcore drunk looking for one last drink comes in this close to closing. Second, you look like you've taken a nap, perhaps resting up for something. And third, you don't want to talk about it."

His grin grew wide while I made my case. "Damn, Jack," he said. "You always were pretty sharp." He took another sip of beer, then glanced suspiciously over his shoulder at the other patrons. The regulars there were all staff from the Veteran's Hospital, and they sat completely absorbed in the clink and chatter of their separate conversations. Satisfied, Macy turned back to me, leaning forward with his elbows on the bar. "Tonight," he said, "we're going to have some fun. What are you planning on doing after you close up here?"

For a moment I thought of lying to him, of saying that I was meeting someone or something. Many times since, I've wondered if I made the right choice in deciding to go with Macy that night.

Macy declined to tell me exactly what he had in mind, but his intensity and excitement intrigued me. After I'd closed up the bar we rode in his truck to my apartment. On the way there Macy told me that John Lupo would be meeting us at my apartment.

I was slightly offended, feeling somewhat taken for granted. "That was pretty self-confident of you, wasn't it?"

"What?"

"To assume that I would go along with your plan, and make arrangements for people I don't even know to meet me at my own apartment after work?"

"Well," Macy said, "I just figured you'd be interested in some fun, that's all."

"But what if I wasn't?"

"Then I'd go talk to John and he wouldn't show up."

I decided to let it ride. "Where's John now?" I asked.

Macy almost made a sour face. "He's over at his girlfriend's apartment."

"Is this the girlfriend with the baby born out in the desert?"

"No, that was his wife."

"So he's married and he has a girlfriend?"

"No, he's divorced and he has a girlfriend."

"What happened to his wife?"

"Is this your place?" Macy asked, beginning to pull into a driveway a block away from mine.

"No, mine's up there on the left. Brick building."

He adjusted his course and continued the story. "His wife? Well, see, he was working in New Mexico—"

"I though you said he worked with you."

"No, he was *doing a job* in New Mexico, but that was years ago. Actually, he didn't even live here at the time. He grew up on the Navajo reservation up north. His father is full-blooded Indian." He paused.

"I take it his mother isn't."

"That's right," he said. "He wound up moving to Winslow and got a job doing roofing there, and that's where he was when he was married."

"I see," I said.

"So anyway, he was doing a job in Albuquerque, and they finish the job up a day early and come back, so he figures he'll drop in and give his wife a bit of a surprise." He stopped talking while he parked his truck in the driveway I was pointing to.

"So was she surprised?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, killing the lights and the engine, "boy were she and her new boyfriend ever surprised."

"Wow," I said as we climbed out of Macy's truck. "So how many pieces did he leave them in?"

"What?"

"Did he beat them up bad or what?"

Macy frowned and shook his head. "Nothing like that at all. He just walked away." He waved his hand off to the side when he said it, like he was turning down spinach jello or something. "He told me that if the bitch wanted to screw around on him, she wasn't worth keeping—or fighting over."

I knew there had to be more to the story, a secret girlfriend of his own or something. Nobody just walks away without revenge of some kind unless he has a guilty conscience of his own. I also knew, however, that it really wasn't Macy's business to go around telling every detail, so I let it slide. "So all this happened before you knew him?" I asked.

"Yep, a couple years ago."

"Where's his wife now? Still in standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona?"

"Yep. And she got the kids, too."

"Wow." I thought about this for a moment. "He must be a lot older than we are."

"Yeah," Macy said. "He's thirty-two."

"Wow," I said again. At the time, that sounded insanely old to me. I unlocked the door and we went inside.

"This is a pretty nice place," Macy said.

My apartment on West Devonshire was a large studio, all one room except for the bathroom, but I had it laid out so that there was a distinct kitchen area and a separate bed area and a space by the front window not unlike a living room, kind of fenced in by a pair of couches in an *L*shape. I offered Macy a beer and got one for myself as well, and we settled onto the couches. I kicked off my shoes and put my feet up on the coffee table, but Macy sat on the edge of the couch with his feet squarely on the floor, resting his elbows on his knees, kind of leaning into the conversation, which I continued.

"Yeah," I said. "It's small, but I like it. So, John's over at his girlfriend's place?"

"Yep."

"Is he going to leave there this late to come here for whatever you have planned?"

"Yep. He wouldn't miss it for anything."

"So are you going to tell me what this is all about or what?"

"Not yet. I'll wait till John gets here."

With all this secrecy, I would have suspected some people of trying to entice me with some kind of herbal intoxicant. Not Macy, though. He let his language get carried away, but Macy had always been the type who followed the straight and narrow. His words frequently ran foul, but his actions rarely did. When we were in high school he went to church every Sunday—religiously, I guess you could say. And Macy was no quitter. I would have been surprised if he'd adopted any behavior pattern including drug abuse. But I was confused about why John Lupo was leaving his girlfriend to come to my apartment for—whatever.

"So," I said, "did John bring his girlfriend with him from Winslow?"

"No, not even close." Macy's eyes were alight with this talk of John Lupo. "After he divorced his wife there, he quit his job and came here and he lived right out in the desert for a whole year."

"No."

"Yeah! Can you believe that, man? A whole year out there, just fishing and hunting."

"Where did he sleep?"

"He built a little hut—a *hooch*, he called it."

"Didn't he bathe?"

"Of course he *bathed*. He washed himself off in the river, I think."

"And he just ate fish?"

"Yeah, well, fish, rabbits, whatever he could catch."

"Where-where did he get water?"

"From the river, dude. Or from cactuses and things."

"Wow," I said. I mulled this over for a bit. "Whatever made him go off and do something like that?" Macy shrugged. "He says he was just doing some soul searching. Thinking about life and marriage and kids and all and what's the point." He shrugged again.

"What does he do now?" I asked, developing an interest in the man myself.

"He's my boss," Macy said.

"Doing what?"

"Oh, we work for a contractor, laying tile roofs on houses. Right now we're doing a bunch of new places going up in Cave Creek."

Another difficult point crossed my mind. "How did he get into that? I mean, he couldn't just walk in all scuzzy and ragged out of the desert and ask for a job."

Macy thoughtfully sipped his beer. "No," he said. "He's got a brother somewhere around here. I think he put John up for a while until he got his own place and stuff."

I sipped my own beer and thought for a second. It was almost onethirty. Usually I went to bed just before dawn, so it was no big deal to me, but I wondered if John was as enthusiastic as Macy about coming to my place for God-knows-what on a Friday night. "Who's this girlfriend of John's?" I asked.

Macy acted slightly irritated, rolling his eyes a little. "She's a nurse over at the VA hospital," he explained. "He stopped some clown from stealing her purse a few months ago down at the store, so she invited him to dinner, and they've been seeing each other ever since."

"Do you think it's serious?" I asked.

He kind of rolled his eyes again and shrugged. "I don't know. This is the first girl he's trusted enough to go out with since he left his wife. And today he was talking about moving in with her."

"What do you think of her?"

"She's a nice person," he said. "Great body." He sipped again at his beer. "But she acts all fragile out in the desert."

"Fragile?"

"Yeah, like some kind of actress, or something. She's got her wide straw hat and her suntan lotion. Me, I just let it burn me. I figure I'll get used to it, working on roofs all day and going to the desert every weekend."

I doubted that, but I didn't say so. "I take it John doesn't use any suntan lotion?"

"Nah. He's got dark skin anyway, so the sun doesn't bother him too much. He's half Indian. His father was Navajo, and it sure shows in John."

At that moment another truck rumbled into the driveway and parked alongside Macy's. For a second the headlights glared in through the front window, then they and the engine cut out simultaneously.

"That's John now," Macy said, rising out of his seat. I stood, too, and opened the door for this interesting newcomer. As John got out of his truck and walked to my door I sized him up. His flannel shirt, jeans, moccasins, and that suede leather outback hat combined to give him a rough, rugged look. Though he was fairly short, even if you included the hat, he had some mysterious air of control around him.

"Hey, hey, John!" Macy said, stepping into the doorway.

"Hey, I was afraid you guys might start without me," John returned.

Macy and I stepped back as John walked through the door into my apartment. "No, of course not, John, we couldn't go without you," Macy said.

"The world turned fine without me before I got here," John said. "It'll turn just fine without me after I'm gone. And I think it will even keep turning if I take a break to see my girlfriend."

I thought that was a strange thing to say, but then again I'd been expecting an introduction. I got it now.

"Jack Trexlor," Macy said, "meet John Lupo. John, this is my old friend Jack." We shook hands. His grip was firm, but not overbearing. Macy added, "Jack's a painter."

"Well, not exactly," I said. "Actually, I'm a bartender. I just paint a little."

"Go ahead, Jack," Macy said. "Show him one of your paintings."

I shot Macy an irritated glare. "I don't want to bore the guy out the door as soon as he gets here." To John I said, "Would you care for a beer?"

"Sure," John said, smiling a bit for Macy.

I went to the refrigerator and brought out three bottles. When I got back with them Macy had led John to the wall by the door to the bathroom, where they were looking at a drawing. Immediately, a lump formed in my stomach. I had several of my paintings and drawings on my walls. Above the end of the couch was a very nice portrait of an orange tabby cat. On the opposite wall, beside the entry door, was a landscape painting of a fiery sunset over jagged mountains, an explosion of color. Many other paintings and drawings were scattered about the place, most of them harmless. Ignoring these, they had stopped in front of one done in crayon and pencil, an uneven, ugly drawing, created when I was in a dark place, and only displayed now to whet my mind for something better.

As I handed them their beers, Macy asked, "You do this one, Jack?" I sighed. "Yep, sure did. There's no signature in the corner, but, yep." They gazed at it, silent for a moment.

"What is it?" Macy asked.

I sighed again. "This is a woman, smiling, giving birth standing up," I said, pointing with the mouth of my beer bottle. "This guy's her husband, also smiling, beating her in the head with a club. And that's her baby, half-born, already with a club in his hand." Another silence. We all sipped our beers thoughtfully.

"What's that?" Macy asked, indicating a long-haired extra in the top left corner of the canvas.

"That's a saint or a bishop or something, smiling because he thinks this abuse is great."

Macy was puzzled. "That's-isn't that kind of sacrilegious?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I never said it was good. Or proper. It just seemed like a good idea at the time." I turned to John. "Now that," I said, indicating the tattoo on John's upper left arm. "That's art." The tattoo portrayed a bald eagle, wings spread, beak open in a silent scream, talons stretched wide at some unseen prey. The details were crisp and the colors vivid.

"Yeah," John said. "I got that done a couple years ago."

"It's very good," I said in genuine appreciation.

"Thanks," John said.

"Why don't we have a seat," I said, walking toward the sitting area, and you can tell me what's so exciting that's going on tonight."

"Okay," Macy said. He and I resumed out previous sitting positions. John took the chair across the coffee table from Macy, to my right. "Tonight," Macy said, "we're going skating."

"Skating?" I asked.

John was smiling.

"Skating," Macy said. He was silent, like I might possibly know what he meant.

I didn't have any idea. "I don't want to sound stupid, but—what are you talking about?"

John explained. "We go out into some quiet neighborhood and fire a couple of shots—not to hit anything, just so that somebody'll call the police."

"Then we duck and dodge the neighbors and the police to get back here," Macy said.

"We 'skate' past the opposition," John said. "Skating."

It didn't sound like fun to me. "Isn't that illegal?" I asked.

"Of course it is," John said. "If it wasn't, it wouldn't be so much fun."

"Are you comin'?" Macy asked.

I wound up going.

When John and I got back to my apartment, Macy was leaning in the shadows of the doorway. He spotted us and trotted out to walk in with us. "Damn!" he said. "I was getting worried about you guys. What the hell took you so long?"

"Macy," John said, "I think that tonight Jack and I had a bit more fun than you did."

Macy caught sight of the blood on the side of my head as I unlocked the door. "Wow! Jack, what happened to your head?"

"Let's talk about it over a beer," I said. Inside, I got us a round of beers and went to clean the wound on my head as they settled onto the couch and chair. There wasn't much blood, but in washing the cut I noticed something really weird. The Mexican thug had been wearing a ring; that's what had cut my temple. The ring had left a backward imprint welt on my head. In the mirror I could read what it said: *Deer Valley*. A class ring. By morning it would be swelled up and probably illegible, but now the narrow little Gothic letters were plain in the welt.

I joined Macy and John in the living area, and John and I briefly recounted our adventures to Macy, who listened mouth-open with rapt attention. When we told him about the backyard four-thug fight scene he made us repeat every detail twice.

"Damn!" he said when we finished. "I wish I'd been there with you guys. I didn't see anybody the whole way back. Not one police car." We sipped our beers thoughtfully. "Maybe if I'd been there you wouldn't have been punched in the head."

"Yeah!" I said. "Check this out." I showed them the *Deer Valley* welt. "The dude was wearing a class ring."

"That's pretty cool, man," John said, laughing.

"Deer Valley's up by Cave Creek," Macy said.

"I know," I said. "Those guys seemed a bit old to be wearing class rings."

"Maybe they weren't all wearing class rings," John suggested. "Only one of them punched you in the head."

"At least they were all beat up when you left, right?" Macy asked.

"At least," John said. Another moment of reflective silence followed in which we drank more of our beers.

"Well," Macy said finally, "did you like it?"

I didn't know exactly how to answer. "Sure," I said, "it was fun. Except when I was being chased by the police or joggers or being attacked by dogs or oafs it was fun, yeah."

John was laughing.

"Well," Macy said, "you have to admit it *did* get your adrenaline flowing."

"Which is why we do it," John said.

"It wouldn't have been flowing so well if I had known that those were only blanks. I really figured that it was raining lead on some poor fool in central Phoenix."

"Was it fun enough to do again sometime?" John asked.

I wondered, but I didn't think so.

While I was trying to decide what to say, Macy asked me, "What days do you have off this weekend?"

I hoped I would give the wrong answer. "Sunday and Monday?"

"Great!" Macy said. "You can come fishing with us in the desert!"

I'd been afraid of that. "Gee, I don't know," I said. "I was kind of hoping to do a painting this weekend."

"No problem," he said. "You can do one out there. I have to tell you, man, there's unbelievable beauty out there."

"I don't know. I couldn't exactly take a canvas and an easel and a bunch of acrylics out there. Not to mention the brushes." Georgia O'Keeffe, of course, had done just that, but I didn't figure Macy knew of her.

"True," Macy said.

"No problem, dude," John said. "You can just take a sketchbook and some pencils and draw the picture out there and paint it when we get back. I've seen lots of people out there sketching."

I thought about it. I *had* seen many impressive paintings of the desert in the Phoenix Art Museum. And I did rather enjoy the company. "Okay," I said.

"Great!" Macy said. To John he asked, "Just us guys?"

"Sounds good to me," John said. "It'll be a little less...hectic that way. We'll fish all day and all night and come back Monday morning."

"Okay," I said. I still wasn't sure I believed me.

"Great!" Macy said. "We'll pick you up at eight."

# Chapter Seven: City at Night

Of course, there's no *real* record of what went on around the city that night. So much of that night—and all those nights—no one really cared to record or remember. So, like most of everything, the exact nature of it is lost forever. Certain things, though, can be guessed; others can merely be feared.

Far out on the eastern edge of the valley, the coming day had just begun to touch the edge of the horizon, drawing an edge of darkest gray to the distant mountains. In the center of town, on West Devonshire, two figures exited an apartment in a brick building, got into separate vehicles, and drove away in the quiet morning.

Not far away, a dog limped up onto the carpeted back porch of a rundown little house. He whined at the back screen door a bit, and, getting no response from inside, curled up in a corner of the porch to wait for the people inside to awaken.

In another house nearby, a police cadet tried to rouse his wife, pointing at the scrapes on his knees and the bruise forming on the side of his hip. Not getting sympathy from her, he picked up the phone to make a formal complaint.

And in yet another house, not too very far from the brick apartment building, two very large guys sat on the couch in their living room. The back door stood open to the cool air of morning, and a friend stood in the door, watching the darkness outside as if he was hoping someone would come back. The friends were sore, but it was their pride that hurt more

than anything. Shot glasses lined up on the coffee table had tempered the pain. In low voices they made quiet plans and dark threats.

In the other chair in the living room, a girl sat yawning into the back of her hand. She'd thought about leaving earlier, but then she'd decided to stay and help her friends. They weren't really good friends, but they were the best she had.

Such is life.

The Desert King

# Part II: Sunday

# Chapter Eight: Sunday Morning

I woke up Sunday morning in a melancholy mood. Just before waking, I'd been dreaming something depressing. After I woke up I couldn't remember anything of the dream. It had all evaporated away, except for the gloom.

The crowd at Gridlock the night before had been unusually light. I'd gotten home fairly early, and when I awoke at seven that morning I felt refreshed and alive, but sad for no good reason.

Then I remembered that Macy and John were picking me up at eight, and I was going on a fishing trip to the desert, and I didn't really like fishing in the first place, so I didn't really know what I was going to do there "all day and all night", as John had said. I couldn't draw *that* much.

I fired up a pot of coffee and took a quick shower while it brewed. Afterward, dressed in a robe, I sat down to savor my first cup at the table in the kitchen area.

I wondered what had made me decide to go to the desert with Macy and John. Maybe it was because Macy had turned up and it felt good to have an old friend back in my life. After I'd left Kingman, even my oldest friends hadn't been very friendly. I couldn't blame them too much, but that didn't help my social life any. In the months I'd been bartending in Phoenix, I'd become friendly with the regulars, but that wasn't the same. All in all, I was glad that Macy had turned up again.

And Macy was going fishing in the desert. It wasn't my preferred hobby, but I supposed that it would at least be relaxing. I might enjoy myself. I might draw something worthwhile. And maybe, just maybe, I might learn something.

I frowned at my closet at the back of the room, wondering what to wear to the desert. I needed short clothes and long clothes. It was going to be too hot for long pants and long sleeves, but if I wore shorts all day the sun would burn me like a fast food French fry. I decided to wear shorts and a T-shirt and pack jeans and a flannel shirt in my duffel bag. Then I threw in swimming trunks and a towel and an extra T-shirt and socks. I didn't know what footgear was best for the desert, but my running shoes were all I had that would hold up out there.

I brushed my teeth, then immediately stained them again with another cup of coffee. I wasn't going to take my toothbrush, then I decided to, just in case. In case what? In case there was a sink out in the desert? The toothbrush and toothpaste went into the duffel bag. Any water, from a canteen or the river or anyplace, was better than moldy teeth. Well, water from *almost* anyplace.

Then it was just before eight. Macy and John would be stopping in any minute. I poured my last cup of coffee and thought. Did I have everything?

The parking lot for my apartment building was outside my window, and from my chair at the table I could watch my neighbors come and go. Now there were just two little kids playing in a sprinkler puddle. Sharon and Macy would be having a kid soon. I wondered when. I wondered if he or she would wash his or her hair in a puddle like these kids. I wondered where their mother was and how long it would take her to notice her kids washing their hair in the puddle.

Then my mug was empty. I wondered if we would have coffee in the desert. Probably not. Maybe I could get some instant. No, we wouldn't have any hot water. Strange that a place as hot as the desert would have cold rivers instead of hot. Real men didn't need coffee in the desert, and they don't drink instant coffee, anyway. Any minute Macy and John were going to drive through that puddle.

### The Desert King

I wondered where real men slept in the desert. I wondered *if* real men slept in the desert. No. Wait, they must. I wondered if I should take a blanket. No. Real men slept on the ground, under the stars. Besides, it wouldn't be too cold at night.

Then I snapped my fingers, remembering my initial reason for going to the desert and feeling a little stupid. I dug out my sketchbook and some charcoal pencils and packed them into my duffel bag. Without them, I would have been *really* bored.

It was ten after eight when I sat down again and drank my last cup of coffee. I wondered what was taking Macy so long. I thought about calling him to find out. No. The kids outside had stopped washing their hair. Now they were drinking the puddle water from a doll's cup. I decided to walk down to Macy's place to see what was keeping him.

I scribbled a quick note to Macy saying that I was walking to his place and taped it to my door, hoping it wouldn't attract burglars. As I locked the deadbolt I noticed that I was finally in a good mood. Maybe it was all the coffee. Maybe it was the prospect of a sunny day in the desert. Maybe it was the chance to spend some time with some old friends, or maybe it was seeing the neighbor kids washing their hair in the puddle.

No, it was the coffee.

Even at only a quarter after eight, it was hot on the streets of Phoenix. The temperature was already into the nineties, and with the approaching monsoon, the air was balmy. But the sun was still low enough in the sky for the trees to provide adequate shade, and the bustle and activity of the city's Sunday morning kept me in good spirits during my walk.

Macy and Sharon's place, like most of the apartment buildings in Phoenix, was part of a complex. Some developers built pockets of threestory apartment buildings, mostly forming rectangles around courtyards and swimming pools and parking lots. The sign in front of Macy and Sharon's complex announced that this was *Saguaro Terrace*. The sign stood on an island of turf between the in-driveway and the out-driveway and the first parking lot. Behind the sign on the island rose not a towering saguaro cactus but a massive palm tree.

The stack and shuffle of cinder block cubicle apartments, with all those immediate neighbors, suggested to me why Macy might be obsessed with the desert: he was probably claustrophobic from living here.

I passed Macy's truck in the parking lot, and it didn't take me long to find his apartment, even though I took the long way past the swimming pool to get there. Next to his door was a window with the curtain drawn closed. It looked dark and quiet. Wondering what was or wasn't going on, I pushed the doorbell button beside the door.

Almost at once, the door opened a crack and Sharon peeked out. Seeing me, she made a disgusted face and opened the door wide for me to enter. I did. It was much cooler inside.

"Macy!" she called toward the back of the apartment. "Your friend is here."

"Hello, Sharon," I said.

"Hi," she returned coldly. The door opened into, and I now stood in, the dining room. To my right was a small kitchen to which Sharon now stomped. Ahead, the dining room became the living room, and on the right of that, behind where the kitchen was, a hallway led to parts unseen and unknown. I presumed Macy was somewhere back there.

Sharon whipped open a cupboard, yanked out a coffee cup, threw the cupboard door closed, and slammed the coffee cup on the counter. She grabbed the pot and dumped some coffee into the cup. After pitching the pot back onto the warmer plate, she stalked back past me to the dining room table. "At least you could close the door, Jack."

I did.

Macy poked his head out of the hallway. His face was red and his hair rumpled and wet. "Hi, Jack," he said. "You ready to go out to the desert?"

I nodded. Sharon gave Macy an evil look. He ignored her.

"I just got out of the shower," he said. "I, uh, overslept. I'll be ready to go in a few minutes." He disappeared back into the hallway, then he stuck his head out again. "Go ahead, have a seat." Then he was gone again.

The dining room table was to my left, and I cautiously pulled out the closest chair and sat down. As I did, Sharon put down her coffee cup and went to the hallway and leaned against the wall.

"I don't see why I can't go," she said to Macy.

I couldn't hear what he said to her.

"So why does it have to be just you guys?"

Again I couldn't hear Macy.

"So? You could still do that if I was there."

Another pause.

"I like fishing, too. And besides, I could lay out and get a tan."

Macy walked out into the living room wearing shorts and carrying his shirt and socks. "Sharon, I told you. We already decided it would be just us guys. If I say you can go, John'll be mad 'cause he told Erica she couldn't go."

"So, just tell him she can go, too," she said.

"I can't," Macy said, pulling on his T-shirt and sitting on the couch to put on his socks. "We're not coming back till tomorrow afternoon, and she has to work Mondays. Besides, even if she had the day off, by the time he got her ready it'd be too late. We should already be gone. The day's flying by."

The phone rang. Sharon went to the kitchen and answered it. "Hello," she said. Macy stood up and looked at her. She moved out of his sight, took the phone away from her ear and put it down on the counter. She smiled at Macy as she walked past him into the hallway.

"Well," he said, "who was it?"

"It's John," she called back.

Macy sprinted to the phone. I couldn't hear most of what he said, but I did catch, "What's she going to do about work, man, if we're not coming back till tomorrow night?" I started getting bad vibes about the whole deal. After about a minute of quiet conversation he hung up and gave me a look of great impatience.

"Sharon!" he yelled.

"What?" she yelled back from what I guessed was the bedroom.

"John said Erica wants to go too, so we decided that we would take you girls."

Sharon stepped out of the hallway. "Sure, just do whatever John tells you to," she said, and disappeared before Macy could reply.

Macy looked at me and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Women," he said quietly, so she couldn't hear.

Sharon packed clothes for them while Macy and I loaded other gear into his truck. In several trips we loaded an empty cooler, a cooler stocked with rolls and meat from the refrigerator, lawn chairs, fishing rods, a bait bucket and my duffel bag. When Sharon had packed their bag of clothes, we loaded that, too.

Then John showed up, saying that Erica would be along in a few minutes, and Macy and John moved John's fishing gear into Macy's truck.

And Erica still wasn't there.

"Come on," Macy said. "Let's go have a cup of coffee while we wait."

Inside, Macy and John and I sat at the dining room table with our coffee while Sharon stood by the living room window, watching for Erica and making sure no one started unloading Macy's truck.

"You know," John said in a low voice, "Sharon won't be able to see Erica if she parks out back."

"Shhh!" Macy said, his voice just above a whisper, glancing over his shoulder at Sharon. "Just let her be. She seems to be in a good mood right now."

John smiled understandingly. "So," he said, his voice normal now, "you want to go up by Horseshoe Lake where we did last time?" Macy thought a bit. A long bit. John and I sipped our coffee. "No," Macy said finally, "why don't we go over to Bartlett Lake?"

John made a face. "I don't like Bartlett Lake," he said. "Too many people."

Macy thought again and we all sipped our coffee. "How about a bit farther up above Horseshoe, then?" he suggested.

John's eyes kind of lit up and he smiled. "The area of Sheep Bridge," he said. "Excellent." Macy smiled too, proud of the suggestion. I was curious.

"What's so nice about that area?" I asked.

"There's a lot less people up there," John explained. "And there's a lot thicker undergrowth, so there's a lot more deer."

"It's not deer season, though, is it?" I asked.

"It always is," John said, smiling, "as long as you don't get caught."

Macy chuckled.

The doorbell chimed. John got up and answered it. "Hi, Erica," he said, smiling broadly. "You must have parked around back. Come on in. We were just finishing our coffee."

He stepped back and she stepped forward into the doorway. "Jack," John said, "this is Erica Bailey, my girlfriend. Erica, Jack Trexlor, an old friend of Macy's."

I saw her, and my breath escaped me.

She wore a neat, trim, pale yellow jumpsuit with short sleeves. The legs were tucked into black boots on her feet, and a thin black belt laced around her waist. Over her shoulder was the strap of her duffel bag. On her head was a wide straw hat. Long, straight, blonde hair. Beautiful deep blue eyes.

I couldn't believe it. Not the fact that she was absolutely gorgeous and she was coming along.

But the fact that I already knew Erica Bailey.

## Chapter Nine: Erica Bailey

She looked at me when John introduced us. She looked for only a couple of seconds, and if she recognized me it didn't show in her face.

"Great!" Macy said, leaping out of his seat. "Let's get on the road!"

John followed Erica out the door. Sharon immediately came over, complaining about "people growing up in barns", and cleared away the coffee cups to the kitchen. Erica and John had already walked around the corner when Macy and Sharon and I headed out. As we walked to Macy's truck in the parking lot, I tried to think of some way to back out. But even with my mind running in high gear, I could think of nothing—except Erica Bailey.

Reluctantly, I followed Macy and Sharon to the truck. Macy's truck was an older model Chevy, with a simple, squarish body style and a short bed. The truck's myriad of small dents and its scratched and faded yellow paint showed that it had seen some harsh conditions. I couldn't tell if it was a four-wheel-drive model, but its thick, knobby tires looked like they could handle a trail.

Seating was a problem. Macy was driving, because it was his truck. John started to climb into the passenger side.

"Excuse me," Sharon said. "You're in my seat."

"No," John said, "your seat's in the back."

"No," Sharon stated, "I get to sit up front, because this is my truck."

"No," John said. "This is your husband's truck, and I have to sit here so I can tell him which way to go."

### The Desert King

They continued on like this. Macy interjected his comments, telling Sharon that yes John had to sit up front to give him directions and no she couldn't sit in the middle because he needed the space to shift and yes he knew she was carrying his baby but no he didn't think riding in the back would cause it any harm.

While they argued, I stood off to the side of the truck, trying unsuccessfully not to sneak peeks at Erica. Once she caught me and smiled at me. I couldn't tell if she remembered me or if she was just being nice. I really, really hoped she was being nice. She caught me again, and smiled again, only this time somewhat uneasily, like she thought I was a strange creep.

Good. She didn't recognize me, although I probably really was a strange creep.

Finally Sharon lost the argument and climbed into the bed of the pickup. I climbed into the back as Macy fired up the engine. We picked our seating positions as Macy backed out of the parking space and nosed the truck onto Seventh Avenue. In the forward center of the bed, up against the back of the cab, was the spare tire. Sharon arranged her duffel bags and plopped down on it. Erica arranged John's and her duffel bags and settled into the driver's side front corner of the bed. She took off her straw hat and put it in her lap to keep the wind from taking it on a somewhat different ride. I sat in the rear right corner, opposite Erica, leaning against the tailgate and my own duffel bags.

None of us looked very comfortable, but it didn't matter too much. We had barely gotten onto the road when Macy whipped the truck off the road at a gas station. Macy parked the truck in front of the pumps and climbed out. No one else moved, and I leapt out of the back in front of Macy.

"I'll pay while you pump," I said.

"Great," he said, hauling a gas can out of the back. I waited inside while Macy filled the can and topped off his truck. Watching through the window, I saw John slide open the rear window of the cab and converse with Erica and Sharon. Maybe I was just paranoid, but I thought they

### T. F. Torrey

were talking about me. Still, I couldn't think of any way to back out now. I could see that I would eventually have to face the music on this one if I wanted to stay friends with Macy.

But I didn't have to face it just yet. I waited till Macy was done filling and had climbed back into the truck before paying the attendant. Macy took off as soon as I climbed into the back, before I could even get settled in.

And again we had no sooner started when we stopped, this time parked in front of a supermarket down the road from the gas station. John and Macy both got out this time and headed off to the store. I started to get up, but they were already almost through the doors.

"What are they getting?" I asked Sharon.

"They're getting water and ice and some soda to drink out in the desert," Sharon said. She dug through her purse and pulled out some dark sunglasses.

"Ooh," I said, "that sounds like a lot. I better go give them a hand."

"No," Sharon said. "Stay here and keep us company. Those two think they can do everything. Let 'em."

I didn't know how to refuse without seeming awkward. Sharon donned the sunglasses and pulled her sleeves up over her shoulders, settling into her arrangement of duffel bags to work on her tan. At least she was cordial.

Erica pulled out some sunglasses of her own. "So, Jack," she said coolly. "John tells me you're a bartender?"

"Uh, yeah, but I do some painting also."

"Oh?" she asked. "Where?"

"In my apartment."

She laughed. A light, easy, almost musical laugh. "No. I meant where do you tend bar?"

"Oh, uh, it's a little place. You probably never heard of it," I lied.

"Where?" she persisted.

I wondered if she was on to me. "Uh," I said. "It's right around the corner from Macy and Sharon's place." Before she could ask more, I changed the subject. "Have you and John been together long?"

She shook her head, and I forced myself not to notice the way her hair danced on her shoulders and chest. "About three months."

"Really?" Sharon said. "It seems like a lot longer than that." She launched them into a long discussion about when she and Macy had gotten together and how they were excited about finally having a baby and such trivia. It rapidly turned into "girl talk", and they tuned me out.

For the first time since I'd met her again, I was glad that Sharon had opened her mouth. I breathed a small sigh of relief. Erica didn't seem to recognize me, and although that might be a blow to my ego, it was better than a blow to my skull. Sharon seemed to be in a better mood, and things in general looked brighter. The sun in particular looked brighter, and I silently reprimanded myself for not bringing my own sunglasses.

Macy and John returned quickly. I helped them stock the coolers with the ice and water and soda, and soon we were ready to go again.

As Macy and John climbed into the cab, lightning struck: Sharon suggested that Erica and John meet her and Macy for drinks and dancing sometime. Erica said maybe at the bar where I tended.

"Gridlock?" scoffed Sharon. "No, we should go to a *real* bar, a dance club."

Erica stared at me wordlessly.

I tried to be nonchalant as I turned away, but everything inside me wanted to run away. I could tell: she was remembering.

Macy fired up the engine and guided the pickup back onto Bethany Home Road, heading east, into the sun. The wind hissing in my ears gave me good reason not to try to talk and the sun ahead gave me incentive to look away from Erica, as if I needed any. Occasionally I sneaked peeks. She stared at me constantly, a mixture of ire and astonishment in traces on her face.

Macy drove us north on Seventh Street and through many lights out on Cave Creek and finally out on Bell Road. Throughout the trip, Macy

### T. F. Torrey

and John chatted in the front, though I heard nothing but the wind in my ears and the tires on the road. Sharon closed her eyes and lay back and tanned, and somewhere on the way she dozed off. For the first part of the trip Erica hardly took her eyes off me. From the look on her face I could see she was trying to remember, and perhaps remembering more than she wanted to. After a while she stopped watching me and stared alternately into the hat on her lap and off into the distance, occasionally glancing up at John in the cab.

I used the time I wasn't sneaking glances at Erica to study the scenery. It reminded me of the pictures on jigsaw puzzles. For much of the trip north, even though we left the limits of Phoenix, we never quite left the city. Several jagged mountains rose like monolithic rocks through the industrial carpet of the Valley of the Sun. Houses rose partway up the slopes before the mountainside became too steep for a house or a driveway. Though the jagged slopes challenged the tenacity of even the hardiest of plants, towering saguaro cacti dotted every surface, clinging sturdily to the sides and rising majestically from the peaks.

It had been a long time since I'd been to the outskirts of Phoenix. In the city, so many palm trees have been planted that you'd have thought they were indigenous. As civilization gave over to nature on the outskirts, I found myself keenly aware of the beauty of the area. Although the whole area was indeed all desert, I became sharply cognizant of the difference between the city desert we were leaving behind and the raw desert we were headed into. I had grown up in Kingman and lived recently in Phoenix, but I had rarely ventured off the civilized path. I wondered what the region had looked like when it was all still wild, before Phoenix had been born. I even almost began to look forward to my fishing weekend in the pristine desert wilderness.

But then I sneaked a look at Erica, and all that came crashing down. Her face had continued to fall since Sharon's mention of Gridlock. I could tell now that she remembered me, and that knowledge would be hanging over my head the whole weekend, until the inevitable showdown occurred. Suddenly Macy slowed down and pulled off the road into a gravel parking lot. So abrupt was Macy's stop that the coolers slid forward into Sharon's feet, waking her with a start. I had to hold on to the tailgate to keep from being flung forward. I sat up quickly, expecting to see some emergency situation. There was none. I looked at the sign over the shop to see where we were. With a giant neon orange B and a similar enormous T, the sign said that this was Bill and Ted's *Excellent* Bait and Tackle Shop.

Sharon sat up and stretched as John and Macy hopped out of the cab.

"We're going to get some line and stuff for fishing," Macy announced.

"I'm going in, too," Sharon said, stepping over the rods and gear onto the side of the pickup and hopping down onto the gravel.

"Do you want to go in?" John asked, looking at Erica. She shook her head. Macy looked expectantly at me, and I shook my head also. A bell on the door jingled as they went inside.

I looked away from Erica. This was the edge of civilization. The bait and tackle shop was one of the last buildings in sight along the road. The road had finally narrowed down to only two lanes, and the traffic was quite light.

Erica immediately interrupted my appreciation of the relative solitude. "What are we going to tell John?" she asked.

"About what?"

She answered with a hurt stare. She knew exactly, and so did I.

"Nothing," I said.

"We have to tell him something," she said. "If we don't it's like—like we're lying to him somehow."

I sighed. Personally, I thought this lie was acceptable, even necessary. "If we say *anything*, it's going to get blown all out of proportion. Why should we put anybody through that?"

She thought about it a bit. "I just don't want to be hiding anything from him. What if he finds out from somebody else?"

"Like who?" I asked.

"Macy or Sharon?" she offered.

"They don't know a thing about it, and I'm not about to tell them. I didn't tell anyone, not a soul."

I could tell she didn't really trust me. It wasn't difficult to know why. Men have a reputation for bragging to their friends, even in situations where it is extremely ill-advised. As a bartender I'd heard many such boasts, and I'd seen a good many fights break out as a result. It had taught me at least one lesson: silence is golden.

Right now, though, Macy and Sharon and John would be back soon, and I wanted this matter closed. I sighed, searching for the right magical words to help me out of this predicament. "Really, it was no big deal," I lied. "Nothing special."

Bad choice. She looked off at the horizon, biting her lower lip. Her eyes glistened, and I really hoped she wouldn't start crying. "Nothing special," she said softly. "I feel like such a slut."

I tried to think of something conciliatory to say, to make her feel better about silence and everything. "Listen," I began.

But just then the bell on the door jingled again, and the others came out. John banged on the hood of the truck with the palm of his hand as he walked up.

"Hey," he said. "You two awake?"

Erica looked up meekly at him and nodded.

"Great! I was afraid that maybe you two were out here sleeping together." He started to turn away, then realized his choice of words and turned back. "Well," he said. "Not really *sleeping* together, or sleeping *together*, but, well—you know what I mean."

Erica lowered her head just a bit and nodded again.

I gulped. "Well, we're just out here, you know, admiring the scenery."

"Beautiful, ain't it?" Macy interjected, coming around the truck past Erica. He came back to me, pulling a roll of fishing line out of the bag he'd got in the store. "Check this out, man," he said to me. "We got us some *extra* heavy-duty fishing line."

"For what?" I asked.

He was taken aback. "Dude, man," he said. "For channel cats."

"You need a line that strong for catfish?"

"Man, channel cats get *big*. What's the record cat they caught out here, John? Sixty-four or sixty-five pounds?"

"Yeah," John said, "and they get even bigger than that. When the rivers dry up they sometimes pull catfish out of the mud that weigh over a hundred pounds."

"Yeah, man!" Macy said. "John says that lots of people have big fish like that bite on their lines, you know, but most people just don't expect to catch anything that big, so they don't have the right line."

"And you do?" I asked, leading him on.

"Yep," Macy said proudly.

Sharon had climbed back into her seat while we'd been talking. "Hey, let's get on the road!" she called to Macy and John. "I didn't come along to sit in a parking lot."

"Next stop, Tonto!" Macy said enthusiastically. He and John climbed back into the cab.

As Macy pulled back onto the highway, I looked at Erica and breathed a small sigh of relief. She stared off into the distance, eyes as incredibly blue as the sky, deep in thought. I had managed to stall her from telling John so far, but I wondered how long it would burn in her mind before she broke down and told him.

For the next half hour or so, Macy drove us steadily farther out into the desert, headed for the distant mountains of Tonto National Forest. Tonto was a vast wildlife preserve northeast of Phoenix, encompassing millions of acres of desert mountains. Numerous rivers and washes fed several lakes, making the area popular with photographers, campers, bird-watchers, hunters, and—like Macy and John—fishermen. The long ride, however, was not overly exciting. Off in the distance, the mountains loomed larger and larger. Here and there a jagged hill reared up. Now and then we flashed through clusters of housing developments and buildings where civilization was taking root. Once, a sign announced that the fire danger was high. But by and large the land was wide and flat and full of cacti.

Occasionally along the way we passed billboards advertising new housing developments being erected in the area. Most of them had been vandalized, and I found myself wondering who had spray-painted *RAPE* in large black letters across the faces of the billboards, and why. The topics of housing development and sexual assault seemed to me to be completely unrelated. When I saw the first one, I thought some kids had had some fun, or that maybe I'd misread it. After several such defaced billboards, it seemed some person or group must have been responsible, but I didn't understand their motives.

Whoever did the painting certainly took a bunch of time to do it. Along the way I saw at least a dozen marked billboards. They must have felt strongly about it, whatever the point was they were trying to make. And they sure had lots of time and black spray paint.

Erica continued to wear a frown, so I avoided looking at her.

Following Macy's truck about twenty yards back was a tan truck of similar rugged style. The letters across the radiator grill of the one behind us left no doubt that it was a Dodge, and with that distinctive hood ornament I knew it was a Ram. The sun glinted off what looked like a police spotlight bolted to the driver's door. With the glare off the windshield, though, I couldn't see its occupants except in vague silhouette. There were two of them.

I wondered what they were doing heading out into the desert. Perhaps they were preparing to paint some billboards, if they could find any not yet vandalized, or perhaps—there was too much. They could have been visiting or rescuing or sightseeing or anything. From the dented grill and hood, though, I bet they were going someplace rough.

### The Desert King

By this time Sharon had dozed off again, lying limp on the duffel bags. Macy and John talked excitedly back and forth, though it was quite impossible to hear them over the noise of the wind and the road.

I was looking forward when Erica took her eyes off the horizon and cast a hurt stare at me. She then glanced up at John, who didn't notice, and returned her gaze to the horizon.

I wondered why it bothered her so much. If she meant anything to John, surely he would know she wasn't a tramp. He might yet be leery of women in general, after the experience with his ex-wife, but he had to figure that Erica had had a life before she met him. All the same, it *would* be surprising for him to find out that a figure from her past had come along on his fishing trip.

Another idea crossed my mind. A couple of times in my few months at Gridlock I'd seen couples run into her "old boyfriend". Both times the "old boyfriend", probably trying to salvage his ego, had confronted the couple, telling them that he'd "had her and she was no big deal". Both times, fights had broken out and I'd wound up calling the police, and once I'd had to call an ambulance. But never had I seen the "new boyfriend" stay with the girl very long afterward.

If she was worrying about that, though, she was wasting her time. First of all, I wasn't an "old boyfriend". And second, I'd seen John fight, and I didn't want to ride anywhere in an ambulance.

I couldn't help thinking that he must have meant a lot to her for her to be worrying that much about me. But I couldn't think of anything I could do that would help at all.

By this time, Macy had taken a few more turns and we were cruising through the foothills of the mountains. We hadn't passed a settlement in a long while. Suddenly Macy took a left turn and the pavement ended with a jolt. Sharon awoke with a start and looked around. Seeing the pavement receding behind us, she settled back into her cushions to go back to sleep. I took it we still had a long way to go.

Looking around, I was captured somewhat by disbelief. I had had no idea that the foliage would be so thick out in the desert. Dense bushes

#### T. F. Torrey

and thick woods marched right down to the dirt road, so close that I could have reached out over the side and grabbed a handful of leaves and thorns. I figured that we must be close to a lake or a river in order for all those plants to get enough water.

The Dodge Ram had turned with us, but now the driver had dropped back to follow about fifty yards or so behind Macy, no doubt to avoid the plume of dust Macy was sending up behind us. I decided they must be, like us, going fishing, but that truck shadowing us like a menacing dark cloud made me uneasy.

Macy was fairly flying over the road, which was anything but smooth. The bouncing and jarring of the truck shook me so much that it was impossible to stay comfortably seated. Erica, too, looked mighty uncomfortable. On the other hand, Macy and John seemed to be enjoying the ride in the front seat, and somehow Sharon managed to stay sleeping. It crossed my mind that Macy might have noticed the Ram behind us, too, and was trying to lose it by driving fast.

If that was the case, he was dramatically unsuccessful.

Suddenly the Ram charged forward through our dust trail. I'd been riding with my arm draped over the tailgate, and the charge of the Ram surprised me. I yanked my arm back into the bed of the pickup and braced myself into the corner, anticipating the impact.

# Chapter Ten: Truck Combat

But the impact didn't happen. The Ram slowed to our speed and hovered five feet off Macy's back bumper. I looked forward to see if Macy had noticed. He certainly had. In fact, the Ram had the undivided attention of Erica and John as well. Sharon, of course, remained sleeping.

Macy didn't keep us waiting to find out what his reaction would be. I heard the engine howl and felt the truck lurch forward as Macy shoved the accelerator to the floor. Hurtling over the rough road sent the coolers and fishing gear bouncing and rattling wildly in the bed of the pickup. I gripped the side and the tailgate to keep from bouncing around myself.

Our pursuers were undaunted. Their own engine roared, and the Ram never dropped a foot away from us.

All at once, Macy jumped on the brakes, sending the coolers and fishing gear cascading to the front of the bed. Hanging onto the tailgate to keep from being thrown forward, I saw the front end of the Ram dip low as our pursuers slammed on their own brakes. The Ram hood ornament came right up to my face, so close I could have reached out and polished the chrome, but the truck didn't contact us.

Macy stomped on the accelerator again, sending the coolers slamming back into my legs and tossing me against the tailgate. This move pulled us away from the truck behind us.

But not much. The truck dropped back maybe twenty yards, then its engine roared and it charged up behind us again.

### T. F. Torrey

This time I expected the Ram to slow down a few feet from us, but the big truck never slowed. With a metallic crunch the Ram thumped into the rear bumper of Macy's truck.

For a second our truck pitched and bucked and slew sideways and I was sure we were going to roll over. But the engine howled as Macy floored the gas and cranked the wheel, somehow keeping us from spinning around.

Even Macy's expert handling, however, couldn't keep us on the road. When Macy straightened the truck, we were pointed off the road, with no time to turn. Macy jammed on the brakes and we skidded, bouncing sideways again as the front wheels caught the ditch beside the road. The rear end kicked around and snapped into the ditch, pitching me almost over the side and throwing all the coolers into my legs again. The same motion heaved Erica out of her seat, onto the now-awake and startled Sharon.

As we rolled to a stop in the ditch, the Ram's engine roared and they raced by us in a cloud of dust and sand. The passenger flipped us the bird as they rode by.

Then they were gone over the top of a rise, the sound of their engine fading in the distance.

Macy's engine had sputtered and quit when we hit the ditch, leaving us in hot dusty silence to assess our damage.

Before I even had a chance to sit up again, Macy and John had leapt out of the truck and run past the front of it, up out of the ditch as if they might pursue the Ram on foot. Erica climbed off Sharon's legs and asked if she was all right.

"Yeah, I'm all right. I'd be better if my stupid husband knew how to drive," Sharon said. She'd been asleep through the first part of the Ram attack.

Erica and Sharon and I clambered out onto the road to dust ourselves off. I had a good bruise on my shin from one of the coolers, but I was okay. Erica and Sharon seemed all right. With the sound of the Ram growing more and more distant, Macy and John came back to see how their girls were. From somewhere they had produced handguns.

"Can you believe that asshole?" Macy asked.

"You're the asshole," Sharon said.

"I was just driving and that fucker slammed into me!"

"So?" Sharon said, "I was sleeping and you woke me up."

"Hey, man," John said. "We should see if they did any damage to your truck."

Macy's face lit up expectantly and we all went to the back of the truck to look at the bumper. It was fine, except for a small dent that may not have been new anyway and some scratches by the bumper sticker. "It's fine," Macy said proudly.

John started laughing. "Dude," he said. "When did you get that?" He pointed at the bright vinyl bumper sticker proudly displayed on the black bumper. The bumper sticker read: "Operation Game Thief. I Report Poachers. 1-800-VANDALS".

"Just this week," Macy said, a touch of hurt in his voice.

"Why did you get that?" John asked, still laughing.

"Well, I figured it was kind of like a disguise, you know. We take a few deer out of here, and you *know* it ain't hunting season, so I figured that if a game warden saw this sticker he might not stop us."

"Sure, man," John laughed. "He'll just figure he doesn't have to nail us because we're going to turn ourselves in as soon as we get to a phone."

Macy was insulted. He stalked around the truck to look at his wheels in the ditch.

I was catching my breath, still somewhat shocked. "Does this happen a lot?" I asked John.

He shook his head. "Nope. First time."

"And Friday was the first time you got attacked by dogs and joggers?"

"Actually, Jack, you got attacked. I was fine," John said.

"Isn't something strange about that?" I asked.

"Yeah, Jack, you're a trouble magnet," he said sarcastically.

"Wait a minute," Sharon interrupted. "Where were you guys Friday night?"

"We went skating," John said.

"Roller skating?" she asked.

"No," John said. "Shoot guns and run from the police. That kind of skating."

"And you got attacked?" she asked. She took the rest of it in stride.

"No," Erica corrected. "*Jack* got attacked." She sounded almost happy about it.

"Macy said you were planning this fishing trip," Sharon said.

"Well, we did that, too. Kind of," John said.

"How come Erica knew and I didn't?" demanded Sharon.

"I don't know," John said. Then, searching, he added, "He probably just didn't want you to worry, because you're pregnant."

"No," Sharon said. "He's just an asshole."

On the other side of the truck, Macy pretended he didn't hear us, or maybe he really didn't. He kicked the right side tires, but didn't seem to find any problems. He opened the passenger door and rummaged through the gear on the front seat.

"I don't think I'm a trouble magnet," I said.

John shrugged.

Erica shot me a hurt glance, but didn't say anything.

"So why *did* those guys hit us, John?" I asked.

"They were probably poachers," he said, "and they didn't like the bumper sticker."

"You really think they were poachers?" I asked.

"Probably," John said. "Did you notice the dual rifle rack in their back window?"

I shook my head.

### The Desert King

"And the truck was pretty scratched up," John continued. "They've been taking that deep into the desert."

"Is that where the deer hide?"

"No. They're all over. There's just not as many people that far out. Or game wardens."

"So the bumper sticker made them mad enough to try to kill us?"

"Well," John said, "if they get caught, the game warden can confiscate their truck, their guns, their house if they used it to keep the deer in, everything they used in connection with poaching."

"Wow," I said. "That's what they do to drug dealers. That's some serious environmental protection."

"Yeah, man," John said. "They want to keep the deer plentiful out here."

"They might come back to make sure we don't narc," Macy said, rejoining us. He had attached a holster onto his belt and stowed his handgun in it. He tossed another holster to John.

"I doubt it," John said, threading the holster onto his belt.

Macy wasn't convinced. "I'm going to go up here and see if I can see where they went." He trotted up a rocky mound to the right of the truck and looked around.

"If they can lose everything," I asked, "why do they do it?"

"Money," John said simply.

"For the hides?"

"No, for the meat."

"What?"

"Venison is really popular in California," Erica explained. "The ritzy people love it because it has almost no cholesterol or fat."

"*And*, it tastes good," John continued. "If you know the right people you can sell an average size deer for about seventy-five dollars."

"That's not very much, really," I mused.

"But you can get five or six in a weekend if you're good at it."

"That's more like it."

"And if you go out more than just weekends," John said, "you can make a lot of money."

"Wow," I said. "You could really sell that many?"

"As many as you can shoot," John said. "Until you get caught."

"Or somebody turns you in," Erica said.

I was about to ask how John knew so much about it when Macy spoke up. "Hey, you guys," he called enthusiastically. "Check this out."

The bunch of us walked up the rocky mound to where Macy stood, about twenty feet from the truck. Macy wasn't pointing at anything, just standing proudly with his hands on his hips, chest thrust forward, staring at something off in the distance. Following his gaze with my eyes, I saw three birds circling majestically in the breeze, high up in the brilliant blue sky toward the hills.

"Ain't that awesome?" Macy asked.

"It sure is," Erica said, genuinely impressed.

"Beautiful," John said simply.

"We see those all the time," Sharon said.

"Wow," I said. "Are those buzzards or falcons or vultures or something?"

Everybody looked at me as if I was the ignorant, one-eyed moron I felt like. "Close," John said. "Those are bald eagles."

Of course. "I've never seen them in the wild before," I said. Or anywhere else, I thought.

"I'm going to get something to drink," Sharon stated, flatly unimpressed. She headed back down to the truck.

Contrary to Sharon's attitude, the view was impressive. The mound on which we stood wasn't very high, but it afforded us an excellent view of our surroundings.

As Sharon fumbled through the coolers, we gazed. The road ran pretty straight north in this area, partway up the western slope of a valley formed by two rows of foothills. It was over this valley that the eagles flew, riding some invisible updraft, circling higher and higher.

The vegetation grew dense as the land fell away to the east, then thinned as it rose again on the other side. Ahead of us, the road climbed over the western hills as they curved across our path. To the east, we could see the peaks of distant mountains, purple and hazy. Far behind us were the foothills at the edge of Tonto.

I could have appreciated the scenery for quite a while, and if there had been time it would have been challenging to draw. It was gentle, tranquil, quiet, and stunningly beautiful.

But Sharon had stopped rummaging through the coolers. I heard her footsteps on the rocks, moving to rejoin us, to cast this sunny scene in just a little bit of shadow.

Saguaro cacti combed every feature in sight. For the first time, I noticed something strange about them. On the tops of most of the branches, fist-sized, bright red and brown clumps had grown. "What are those?" I asked, pointing at a cactus standing just down the mound to the east of us.

"Cactus candy," John said.

"What?"

"It's the seed pods of the-"

Suddenly Sharon let out the most blood-curdling scream I had ever heard.

# Chapter Eleven: The Snake Incident

When Sharon screamed, my hair stood on end and chills ran down my spine. It sounded like the dying scream of a virgin pitched into a volcano.

We leapt and whirled toward her.

She stood about fifteen feet from us. She'd been coming back from the truck, and now she stood frozen in her tracks, body rigid, knuckles white around the cola can in her left hand, eyes firmly fixed on the ground in front of her. I looked where she was staring and felt an instant surge of adrenaline and fear. Coiled on the sand just two feet in front of her was a diamondback rattlesnake, fiercely shaking his rattle, head raised, poised for the strike.

Macy yanked out his revolver and John grabbed his arm.

"No, man!" John said tersely. "She's too close. The ricochet could hit Sharon or the truck—or us."

"We have to do something!" Macy said, not taking his eyes off the snake.

"I will," John said.

And he did. He moved slowly, carefully across the rocks toward the snake, crouching low, his hands out in front of his body. At first I thought he was going to throw a rock or a stick or something at the snake. But then he was much too close for that, and I thought he must be out of his mind. He was going to try to grab the poisonous reptile with his bare hands.

### The Desert King

All I could think was that if anybody got bitten it was a long way back to the city, to a hospital. It wouldn't take that long for the snake's poison to do its work.

"John, wait! That's—" I began, but Macy stopped me, putting his hand on my chest as if to hold me back.

"He knows what he's doing," Macy said.

I looked at Erica, who stood on the other side of Macy. She glanced quickly at me, opened her mouth as if to say something, then realized that it was to no avail. All eyes locked on John as he moved to within three feet of the snake.

Suddenly the snake whipped around, facing John, reacting to his approach. John didn't flinch. I was momentarily afraid that Sharon would turn and run and maybe cause the snake to strike John, but she stood frozen, her expression mixed with fear and fascination.

John took one more painfully slow and careful step toward the snake, crouching low to the ground and spreading his hands wide, palms forward in front of him. As the reptile moved his head slowly, menacingly side-to-side, John inched his right hand closer. John closed his right hand, angling his fingertips together. The animal seemed to focus on this. John mimicked the snake's side-to-side movement with his right hand, at the same time drawing his left arm back by his chest as if cocking it, still holding his hand open, palm up. John raised his right hand a little. The snake raised his head to follow.

John snapped his left arm out and across in a lightning move. He caught the distracted snake right below its head and stood up quickly.

The snake was not alone in surprise. John turned around toward us and grabbed the snake's whipping tail with his other hand as he walked back to us. Erica and I shied away, but Macy stepped forward to examine the reptile.

"That sucker's gotta be six feet long!" Macy said excitedly.

"Yep," John said, smiling. "Check out that rattle. There's what? Ten or eleven rattles there? Makes this guy over a decade old."

### T. F. Torrey

They continued marveling over the snake. Erica and I walked to Sharon, who still hadn't moved or taken her eyes off the snake. Her left hand gripped the soda can so hard that she'd crushed it, squeezing the drink out the top and over her fingers onto the ground.

"Are you all right?" Erica asked.

Sharon nodded slowly, as if coming out of a trance, beginning to breathe again. "I thought for sure he was going to bite me," she said.

"So did I," confided Erica.

I turned back to John and Macy, just as John heaved the animal down the mound away from us. They watched as the snake landed, then they walked back to us and the truck.

"Aren't you going to shoot it?" I asked.

"Why?" John asked.

"He almost got Sharon."

"Ah, he didn't mean any harm. She just startled him, that's all."

"What if someone else startles him?" I asked.

He shrugged. "They'll probably get bit."

"So why don't you shoot him?"

"Jack, there are thousands of snakes out here. I can't go around shooting all of them."

"You could shoot a few. Better than none."

"People have to understand that it's rough out here. They have to watch out for snakes. They have to be careful, or they're going to get bitten. And snakes aren't the only things out here that'll kill you. There are scorpions and flash floods, or just the sun." He sighed. "This isn't the park, Jack. People have to respect things out here, or they're going to get hurt."

I let it ride. He did have a point.

Macy tried to console his wife. "Are you okay, Sharon?" he asked, putting his arm around her.

She pushed his arm away. "Yeah, no thanks to you."

"Sharon," he said, "it was your idea. You wanted to come out here."

"Well, it was your idea to stop here!"

He was flabbergasted. "Those guys ran me off the road!"

"Well, they wouldn't have if you hadn't picked a fight with them!"

"I didn't—" he said, and stopped. He could see, as all of us could, that argument was futile. "The least you could do is thank John," he said.

"Thanks, John," Sharon said flatly.

I turned back to John myself. "Where did you learn to do that?" I asked.

"Do what?" he asked back.

"To grab rattlesnakes like that, with your bare hands."

"Oh, that. I didn't."

"You didn't? No one showed you how?"

"Nope."

"Well, how many have you grabbed like that?"

"One."

"And that makes two?"

"No. That makes one."

"Well," I said. I didn't know if I should believe him. He wasn't smiling. He didn't *act* like he was joking. "How did you know how to do it, then?"

"I didn't," he said. "That just *felt* like the right thing to do."

"What do you mean?"

"I just—I just tried to get in tune with the snake. I provided him with a target," he said, holding up his right hand with his fingers pointed together as he'd done with the snake, "to distract him. Then I grabbed him quick with my other hand." He swept his left hand across to his right, imitating the move he'd snatched the snake with.

"So you were just guessing you could grab a rattlesnake with your bare hands?"

## T. F. Torrey

"No," he said, thinking. "I knew what I could do. And I knew what he could do. I just figured out a way to do it first." He paused and shrugged. "I was just kind of tuned in, I guess."

"Uh-huh," I said. I didn't know what else to say. I'd been impressed when he grabbed the dog and fought the guys in their backyard, but this was something else.

"Wow," Macy said simply.

Our moment of reflective silence was crudely interrupted. "Are we going fishing or what?" Sharon asked. "'Cause if we're not I want to go home." She'd regained her abrasive composure.

"Hey, hey!" Macy said. "Let's get back on the road!"

Before we reboarded the truck, I asked John what *RAPE* on the billboards meant, and who had put it there.

"Greenpeace," Macy said right away.

John flashed Macy a half-smile. "Yeah," he said, "or someone like them." He turned to me. "A lot of people feel that building condos and stuff out here is raping the desert. Painting that on the billboards makes people think."

That made sense.

"Yeah," Macy said.

Sharon and Erica and I climbed back into the bed and resumed our riding positions. Macy and John examined the truck's position in the ditch. "You can just drive right out of this," John said.

They climbed into the front. Macy started up the truck, pulled slowly forward out of the ditch, and we were off.

As our desert trip continued, I tried to imagine the hills and valleys webbed with avenues and houses and shopping plazas.

Despoliation.

Maybe I'd get some spray paint myself.

## Chapter Twelve: Sunday Afternoon

For the next hour or so, we raced over the desert trails as fast as the terrain would allow. In most places, that wasn't very fast. I don't know if Macy was trying to catch the guys who'd forced us off the road, but he didn't. Our trip was, for the most part, uneventful.

Three times along the road we passed trucks going the other way, heading back to Phoenix or wherever. It felt rather odd heading out when these other people were finishing up and going home. At first I thought they were weird, but then I realized that it was Sunday, and most people had to work Mondays, so actually we were the strange ones. After a while, I thought that was best. I figured I'd rather enjoy the solitude of the desert alone. Come to think of it, I'd really rather have been without John and Erica and Sharon, too.

Twice we forded the Verde River in places where it was wide and shallow. The first time was soon after John saved Sharon. John walked across the river in front of the truck, pushing the larger rocks out of the way. Other trucks that had crossed before had left their tracks on the banks, so Macy had no trouble navigating. I was apprehensive because the water bubbled up over the tires and within inches of the tailpipe. The truck lurched and rocked in the water. Strangely, I noticed that the other occupants didn't share my apprehension. Sharon still slept. Erica still pouted at the horizon. Macy, when he stuck his head out the window and peered down at the water with his brow wrinkled in concentration, looked most concerned of the bunch, and he wasn't *too* concerned. In reality, we had no problems. Soon the truck climbed out onto the bank and we continued. Once we passed a mountain with its name on a barnboard sign: Chalk Mountain. It rose alone from a bit of a plateau just after we forded the river the first time. The trail we were following curved around its expanse, and as we passed I saw the sides of the mountain dotted with black points of what looked to me like abandoned mines. The barnboard sign wasn't actually on the mountain. More directly, the sign labeled the flat ground beside the trail "Chalk Mountain", but the point came across all right.

A lake shimmered blue behind Chalk Mountain. I could see no label, but I figured it was probably Horseshoe Lake. Looking at the lake shrunken in its bed of cracked mud, I guessed that the area was experiencing a drought. The wide flanks of dried mud cast a sense of gloom to the area, a sort of malicious odor of decay. The lake rapidly became more distant as we continued east and north around Chalk Mountain. We met up with the water again at the northernmost point of the lake, where the Verde River poured into it. For a bit we seemed to follow the course of the river upstream. Then the trail arced eastward and I lost sight of the river.

Our path twisted through the hills and mountains in the desert and brought us back to the water some time and many miles later, where the river passed beneath Sheep Bridge. Of course, since it was my first time there, I didn't know at first that this was the fabled bridge. What clued me in was Macy slowing down as we approached it, leaning over in the seat and hollering "Sheep Bridge!" at me through the rear window.

Sheep Bridge impressed me. It spanned the Verde River not from riverbank to riverbank, but from hill to hill. Across the river the land rose sharply into a large hill, which was part of a string of hills and ridges. About midway up this hill, where a ridge cut across its face, giant blocks of concrete anchored the steel cables and girders of the bridge into the hill. On our side, similar blocks held the bridge onto the top of a much smaller hill, suspending the bridge about seventy-five feet or so over the water. It must have taken quite a crew to assemble this sleek and modern bridge so high over the water, so long between the hills, so far out into the desert. Back in Phoenix, Macy had told me that John had delivered his youngest son here. In the air-conditioned comfort of Gridlock, before I'd met John, I couldn't believe it. Now, after the dog and the rattlesnake, with the sun overhead and John in the passenger seat and Sheep Bridge stretched out bigger than life up ahead, I could. On our side, the hill anchoring the bridge was set back a ways from the edge of the water, so that the riverbank and a short piece of land lay under the bridge in the shade. I could imagine John there in that shade, with his wife in labor and in agony, coolly delivering his son. With his outback hat slung low, he'd have that air of calm control. He could do it.

Right now in that shade under the bridge two other trucks found shelter. Macy slowed quickly as soon as he saw them, but neither was the one that had forced us off the road. I didn't see anyone delivering a baby. A couple of people stood on the bank with fishing rods in their hands and a couple more lay on blankets in the sun. As we passed, one of the fishermen nodded and the other waved hello.

Past Sheep Bridge, Macy stayed on the riverbank, driving more slowly. By this time it was approaching noon. The sun beat ferociously on those of us in the back of the truck. I could feel the sweat on the backs of my knees, and I could feel the strain in my eyes and forehead from constantly squinting.

I envied Erica, peacefully keeping the sun off her face with the brim of her hat, which she'd put on again when Macy had slowed down to a speed where it would stay on. I envied her for the jumpsuit that kept her legs protected from the intense sun.

In fact, I envied her jumpsuit for the way it clung to her thighs—no. I forcibly diverted my eyes from her, back to the terrain.

Up the river a bit from Sheep Bridge we forded again, moving back to the side of the river that we'd been on originally. Again John walked out in front of the truck, guiding Macy and moving larger boulders out of the way. Here the river was wider, but shallower. Macy had no trouble crossing. Again, I was apprehensive anyway. Without the truck we'd really be stuck. On the other side of the river, Macy stopped the truck and he and John got out.

I got out, too, stretching my back and legs. I could feel a stupid question forming in my mind, and I fought the urge to ask it, but finally I lost. I asked, "Why didn't we just cross on the bridge?"

Macy and John frowned at me. "What?" Macy asked.

"Why did we drive through the water? Why didn't we just drive over Sheep Bridge?" I asked again.

This was hilarious. They laughed and laughed. Even Erica snickered. I felt stupid. Finally John got around to explaining it to me. "It's for *livestock*," he said. "They use it to take herds of cattle and sheep across the river. You can't drive on it. It isn't wide enough for a vehicle."

"Oh," I said.

Macy was still laughing. "Why do you think they call it *Sheep Bridge*?" he asked.

That was pretty obvious now. I moved on to the less obvious. "Is this it?" I asked, waving around at where we were parked. "Are we there yet?"

"No," Macy said. He regained his composure and began digging through some of the gear in front of where Erica sat. "We're just going to get some bait here."

Macy found what he was looking for and pulled it out: two poles wrapped in some thin netting. He handed it to John and again hunted through the gear, this time pulling out some thong sandals and a bucket. As Macy took off his tennis shoes and put on the sandals, John unrolled the net. Then Macy rinsed out the bucket and he and John splashed downriver a ways. They each held one of the poles, which were attached to the sides of the net. Holding the leading edge of the net down into the water between them and the rear of the net up out of the water, they walked back to us.

As they got back to our position, they lifted the net out of the water. "Wow, check this out!" Macy said excitedly. He reached into the net and pulled out a squirming animal. "Crayfish," he said. "Loads of them." Macy and John picked the minnows and crayfish out of the net and

## The Desert King

tossed them into the bucket. Macy shouted to Sharon until she woke up and told her about the crayfish. She told him to fuck off and went back to sleep.

Macy and John made a few more passes up the river, stopping after each pass to deposit their catch into the bucket. Then they stashed the net, put a lid on the bait bucket, asked me to safeguard the bucket in the back of the truck, and we were off.

The road—if you could call it that—was much rockier on this leg of the trip. We in the back were continually shaken and jarred, even though Macy took it slowly. We were getting into no-man's-land. Even I could tell. Past Sheep Bridge I saw no rings of rocks indicating anyone had built a campfire. No more trucks passed us on their way out of the desert. Everywhere the desert lay wild and untamed. I got a certain sense of awe just riding through that area. It looked as though no person had disturbed this land in a thousand years, like it had been forever left to the cacti, the birds, and the sky.

We left the river behind after getting the bait, but because the object of our voyage had been fishing I guessed that we would come back to it again. And I was right.

About forty-five minutes after we left the river, we met it again. Here the river looked different—younger. It snaked through the desert up against a cliff it had either cut or run into. The water was clear and brisk and bubbled like a pot of noodles.

Macy stopped some distance away from the river and John got out again. As Macy backed the truck down to the edge of the water, John guided him left and right and finally halted him about fifteen feet from the edge of the water.

As if on cue, Sharon woke up and declared it was lunchtime. No one had any argument there. It was past noon, and I don't think any of us had eaten breakfast. We munched on potato chips and cold cut sandwiches and washed it all down with cold soft drinks. There had been a spot inside me that was really starving, and the sandwiches and stuff hit it right on.

After lunch, the four of them broke out the rods and got down to business. Macy had been pacing and throwing stones into the water throughout lunch. Now he rummaged through the cab of the truck and pulled out a rifle and some cartridges. While he loaded the gun, he explained to John that he was still pissed off about being forced off the road and he was going to vent some frustration by shooting. John, smiling slightly, put some of the minnows and crayfish from the bucket into a coffee can as Macy loaded the rifle. John didn't seem tense or stressed at all. He told Macy good luck and be careful, then they split up.

Macy and Sharon took their rods and the rifle and the bait bucket and trudged off upstream, to my left. John and Erica, with their rods and the coffee can, headed downstream. That left me alone at the truck.

I felt nothing like fishing, not at all like shooting, and just a little like drawing. So drawing it was. I looked around for something good to draw.

We had parked in a bend in the river. To our left and right the river curved back toward us, heavily covered with undergrowth. Where we had parked the truck, however, was mostly bare rocks, with only a few weeds. In the back of my mind I supposed that usually the river ran right where we were standing, but the same drought that had shrunken Horseshoe Lake had reduced the river. Maybe I was just paranoid, but it seemed to me that a flash flood could wipe Macy's truck all the way down to Horseshoe Lake. Maybe us, too. But I figured Macy—or at least John—knew what he was doing.

Across the river from us, a sheer cliff rose maybe forty feet high, running along the other side of the river as far as I could see both ways. The red-brown rock looked somehow ominous and foreboding, and I wondered why. Several jagged washes filled with gravel and thorny bushes cut down the face of the cliff to the river. Past the rim of the cliff, a small cactus-covered hilltop rose softly, as if peeking meekly over the bluff at us.

None of this was the kind of focal point I wanted for my drawing.

#### The Desert King

This left me in a bit of a drawing dilemma. I didn't want to be too close to either Sharon or Erica, not right now.

A rifle shot cracked through the hot desert air. It was Macy, of course, off to my left, venting frustrations. Wondering if his shooting the rifle might be the subject I was looking for, I made my way upstream to find Macy and Sharon.

They hadn't gone far. Right away I spotted Sharon's rod poking out from the shade of a cottonwood tree by the river, her line sloping lazily out to the middle of the stream. Macy stood close by with the rifle butt tucked into his shoulder and the barrel leveled at some target farther upstream. As I watched and waited, nothing happened.

Suddenly Macy lowered the rifle from his shoulder and shook it. Explaining to Sharon that it had jammed, he worked the bolt a few times and slapped the mechanism with the heel of his hand. Finally he raised the rifle to his shoulder again, and this time the rifle cracked off a shot, spitting smoke. He snapped the bolt back, locked it forward again, and popped off another shot.

Excellent. This kind of action was the centerpiece I'd been looking for. They still hadn't noticed that I'd followed them, so I didn't have to worry about them hamming it up or shying away. The gun sounded more like a toy than a cannon, but that wouldn't show up in the drawing. I'd just draw the rifle a bit bigger than it really was. Another thing I wanted different was the background, which now was just the face of the bluff. Thinking quickly, I decided to draw the scene here, then fake in a different background later.

Checking for snakes first, I sat down on the rocks to draw. I sketched quickly, blocking in the major foreground lines so that I could get to Macy.

As I began sketching Macy, his rifle jammed again. Perfect. That gave me the chance to sketch him in before the rifle. As I drew, he took the rifle off his shoulder and worked the bolt.

Apparently that didn't help, because he knelt down and lay the rifle across his knee so that he could work on it better.

#### T. F. Torrey

This worried me. Not because he was having trouble with his gun, but because he had it across his knee with the barrel pointed almost directly at me. I could practically see the bullet lodged in the other end of the barrel, could practically read my name on it.

Then he began to beat on the mechanism again with his hand.

And the little gun that looked almost like a toy *crack-powwed*. I heard the bullet *thwack* through the leaves over my head, and although Macy was at least forty feet from me, I swear I could feel the heat of the discharge on my face.

Macy looked up, noticing for the first time that I'd joined them. His mouth fell open, and his face ran the gamut of expressions: startled, surprised, concerned, apologetic. He finished with his mouth in an *O*, but no words came out.

Sharon didn't notice.

"Jack!" Macy said, hurrying over to me. "Are you all right?"

I almost said yes, but then I remembered hearing stories about people who got shot and didn't even notice until later. I'd always considered myself a fairly alert kind of guy, but all the same I stood up and checked.

I was fine, and said so.

"Jack," Macy said, "I didn't even know you were there."

"I would hope not," I said.

"What happened?" Sharon asked without getting up.

"Jack surprised me," Macy explained. "I almost shot him."

"I came over to draw you guys," I said.

"Jesus, Jack," Sharon said. "You should watch where you're going."

We went on like this for a bit, with Macy swearing he didn't know I was there and didn't mean it, and with Sharon alternately blaming Macy and me, then deciding it was funny and laughing.

I realized that I didn't want to draw them anymore and left. Macy tried to convince me to stay, but it was no use. I wanted to draw. I

#### The Desert King

wanted to get away from Macy and Sharon for a while. So I went off to find John and Erica.

"Try not to get shot," Sharon shouted at me, still laughing as I left.

I didn't answer.

John and Erica had gone farther downstream from the truck than Macy and Sharon had gone upstream. By the time I got to them, my heart had slowed down to normal and I felt better. And the scene here was worth almost getting shot.

John stood at the water's edge, with the water lapping at his feet, intently watching his line in the water. Erica sat to his left with her pole lying on the rocks next to her. She seemed content enough for the moment just to watch him fish. On the other side of them, of course, curled the river. Past it, the bluff was not as tall as it was at the truck, and downriver it got lower and lower, eventually turning into an ordinary riverbank. From my vantage point on a small knoll, I could see hills rising from behind the cliff. Farther downstream, where the bluff was lower, I could see purple mountains in the distance—so far away they were hazy.

Perfect. I glanced at the rocks where I stood—checking for snakes—and sat down to sketch, feeling the hot breeze on my face.

John looked up at me and smiled broadly. "How's the art?" he asked.

"Beautiful," I said.

Erica glanced at me and quickly looked away.

For the next hour or so, I drew John, Erica, the bluff, the river, the hills, the mountains. As I drew what I saw, I was quickly amazed, not by my drawing ability, but by the scenery. Maybe the years I'd lived in the city had prejudiced me. I had expected to be drawing practically nothing but saguaro cacti, but when I opened my eyes to draw I saw a multitude of plants. Mesquite trees, all kinds of grassy weeds, evergreens like holly and hemlock, and all kinds of thorny, cactus-looking things that I didn't know what they were called.

The three fields of vision—the distant purple mountains, the close hills speckled with saguaro and stuff, and the pair of fishermen in the foreground—were stunning to look at, difficult even to sort out in the same eyeful. If I could draw this well, it would be one of my best drawings, and later one of my best paintings, ever.

I quickly sketched in the background and enough vegetation details to keep my memory alive. The atmospheric perspective was amazingly clear in real life, but terribly difficult to capture on paper in pencil. Overhead I drew a couple of the vultures or eagles or whatever they were in the distance. They'd be easy to paint later.

Then I drew in John Lupo. He looked every bit the desert fisherman, decked out in his cut-off shorts and his tan fishing vest and his outback hat slung low against the sun. As I drew, he got a bite on his line and fought in a huge catfish. I drew the fish, too.

The catfish put up a good fight, but he was no match for John. Maybe it was because of that heavy-duty fishing line, but the fish didn't look *that* big. John finally got him in close and grabbed him in his hand, carefully avoiding the spines. He held the fish up for Erica and me to see, grinning.

Erica applauded enthusiastically.

John put the fish on a short piece of rope, got fresh bait from the can next to Erica, and cast his line again downriver. Turning back to Erica, he asked her if she'd like to fish now. She shook her head.

I was glad. Sitting there on the rocks by the water, with her legs crossed, leaning back on her hands, she made an excellent subject. I drew her carefully. I drew her broad-brimmed hat. I drew the delicate curves of her face, the equally gentle curves of her body. I carefully detailed the way her jumpsuit hung loosely on her arms and legs, the way her hair fell about her shoulders to the middle of her back.

When John ran out of bait in his coffee can, he dumped out the extra water and stowed the hook on his rod. Erica got up, and I realized they were going back to the truck for more bait. I got up, too. I was getting thirsty sitting there in the sun. "How's the drawing going?" John asked as they walked to me.

"Great!" I said, noticing that Erica was deliberately avoiding looking at me.

"Let me see," John said.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"It's not done yet."

"So?"

"So, if I let you look at it I'll be jinxed. I won't be able to change it. It won't be mine anymore."

He looked at me funny. Maybe humored, maybe suspicious. "Well, when *can* I see it?"

"When it's done."

"When the drawing's done?"

I thought and shook my head. "When the *painting*'s done."

He rolled his eyes at me. "Artists," he said, with the same tone he would have used to say something like *dirtbags*. "Let's get back to the truck."

He and Erica walked past me as I collected my pencils and closed my sketchbook.

Following them through the bushes back to the truck, I realized that I was beginning to feel quite at ease there in the desert. Sharon and Erica had kept quiet. Sharon even seemed to be getting into a better mood, though it probably helped not to be around her. My drawing was going well. I realized that I'd spent more time drawing Erica than anything else, so it looked like she was the focus of the picture, but that would work itself out. I was thinking of titling my painting "The Big Peaceful Easy".

Though we'd kept our eyes open after our unusual encounter, we hadn't seen any other people since Sheep Bridge. Not park rangers, not tourists or other fishermen, not poachers. No one.

It was still blistering hot, but the worst was past. The sun was on its way down now, and I was even beginning to enjoy the heat. The intense sun felt like it went right through me, cleansing and rejuvenating my body, right through to my bones.

Looking back, I'd say that that was the turning point of the trip. Before that point things went well. Of course, there had been the incidents with the snake and the guys in the truck. But compared with what happened in the next forty-eight hours, we'd been in paradise. Now, however, my enjoyment of the trip was at an end.

It began as John was refilling his coffee can with minnows and crayfish from the bait bucket. Macy came marching back to the truck and threw his rod and rifle into the back. Sharon followed him, slowly, at a distance. "You and me have to talk," he said to me.

I ignored John's raised eyebrows. "Let's go up here," I said, walking back up the trail we'd driven in on, away from the truck and the crowd. Without even thinking, I knew exactly what was wrong.

Sharon had narced.

## Chapter Thirteen: The Logic of War

"Sharon told me," Macy began, "why you weren't at our wedding."

All I could do was sigh. I'd been through this many times before, with policemen and lawyers and judges, with psychiatrists and religious leaders, with other old friends, even with only the darkness. I knew how the conversation was going to go. I knew what he would say, mostly how he would say it, what I would say back, how he would try to make me see the light. I knew that my arguments would be no match for years of dogma. But I hoped against hope that I could somehow make this conversation different.

All the times before, I'd only managed to alienate myself from the people trying to help and understand me. All the times before, I'd drifted apart from my friends. I wanted this time to be different. I wanted to stay friends with Macy. More than that, I wanted to be good friends again.

But I knew Macy wouldn't be able to make me see the light, because the light just wasn't there.

"What did she tell you?" I asked.

"She said you couldn't come to the wedding because you were in some hospital for the mentally unstable."

Normally, I would be compelled to argue with even this statement, to clarify where I was and how I had been unjustly put there and what it meant. Instead, this time, I thought perhaps my best approach would be to simply downplay the whole situation. "Yeah," I said.

"She said you were there because you tortured some guy up in Kingman."

"Yeah," I said again.

"So it's true?"

I nodded.

Macy lowered his eyes and turned away. Just like everyone else had. "You know," he said, "you think you know some people. Then—wham!" He paced back and forth a bit on the rocks, staring thoughtfully at the ground.

I shrugged. "I had good reasons."

"Of course you did, Jack. Everybody has good reasons," he shot back sarcastically.

I sensed that he hadn't heard the whole story, and I wondered how much Sharon had heard.

This kind of questioning attack ran contrary to Macy's nature, but I understood what was happening. I knew that he was in his heart a good and honest person and he liked to think his friends were, too. This revelation had struck to the core of his being, and he was feeling a bit out of his element.

I knew how that felt. At one time, I too had been religious. I had believed in "The Word". Now, however, Macy and I were on opposite sides of a philosophical divide. The only thing that might make things right between us was for him to know the whole story, though that probably wouldn't help, either.

"Did Sharon tell you why I did what I did?" I asked.

"No."

"I should probably tell you the whole story. Maybe then you'll understand," I said.

He stopped pacing and looked expectantly at me. "Maybe," he said. He seemed to be keeping an open mind. Maybe there was hope after all. Maybe this time could be different.

I took a deep breath and started at the beginning. "You remember me talking about Diane?" When I had known Macy those summers in Grand Terrace, I had been visiting my father. Macy had never met Diane. "Your girlfriend in Kingman?"

"Yeah, that's her. Well, back before I left Kingman, she and I were getting pretty serious about each other. We even talked about getting married."

"I think I remember that."

"Yeah. Well, we had some disagreements about some things, like where we might go to college together, but in general we thought we'd be together forever."

"Go on."

"Okay," I said, pausing just a bit, remembering. I didn't like thinking about it. I liked talking about it even less.

By now I had several versions of the story. At the time of the incident, I had gone over the full version with police and lawyers and everyone until I was absolutely sick of it. I wrote the whole story down once, with the intention of telling it no more. When I had to speak of the incident now, I used the abridged version, which I could usually tell without becoming overwhelmed with anger. With the wrong audience, though, it escalated into the I-did-it-and-I'd-do-it-again version, full of venom. I had a feeling that this would be the one Macy would wind up hearing.

"At the time, Diane was working at a flower shop. She liked working there, but she hated her boss. He was always...making passes at her, that sort of thing. She always said no, but he always asked, and it bugged her. It bugged me, too, because the guy knew we were serious. He was always friendly to my face, and behind my back he was always trying to get my girl into the sack."

"And you tortured him for that?"

I held up a hand for patience. "Let me finish my story," I said.

Macy nodded apologetically.

As I continued, he stared intently at me, as if searching my face for the truth. A flicker of hope like the gray first light of day entered my mind. Macy was trying to understand. Maybe, just maybe, he would. "I never let people doing things behind my back bother me," I said. "Everybody does it, and letting it bother me wouldn't change a thing. Besides, Diane and I were in deep. I knew that she wasn't just going to throw that away. I trusted her." I paused again, shaking my head at the memory.

Macy waited for me to continue.

"One morning, I woke up, and everything was different. Everything was different. It was a Sunday. I went to get her for church, and she was avoiding me. I couldn't figure out what was going on. Everything just seemed wrong."

Macy tipped his head questioningly, but didn't speak.

"After church I went back to her house. She was cleaning everything incessantly. I could tell something was wrong, but she wouldn't say what. I tried to console her, somehow, but she was so cold. She didn't want to talk. She was just...empty."

"So what did you do?"

"I-I-what could I do? I didn't know what to do. She was just so-so different-so cold." My memories of that time were still clear. "I went home, and she called me later that night. She said she wanted to go to the drive-in, but it was just a trick. When she came to pick me up, she just wanted to drive around."

Macy waited patiently. I had his rapt attention.

"She was anxious. She wouldn't look at me. She seemed like she wanted to talk, and I actually started to wonder if she was trying to break up with me."

"But she wasn't?"

I shook my head. "She stopped the car in a quiet place, and I knew she was going to tell me something big. I knew—I sensed—something had happened the night before. Finally, she told me."

"Yeah?" He was really on the edge of his feet, frowning with concern.

I took a deep breath. "She said it flat out, just matter-of-fact. She said that the night before, after everyone else had left, her boss called her back into the back storage room of the flower shop, and when she went in he raped her. Just like that."

Macy was stunned, and very clearly disturbed. He sat down on the rocks where he was and thought. Perhaps he was thinking about what he would have done. Apparently coming up empty, he looked up expectantly at me. "Then what?"

"Then—well, then I made a lot of mistakes."

"Like torturing the guy?"

"No, that was okay. I'm talking about before that, right then when she told me."

"Like what?"

"Like I asked her all the wrong questions. I was suspicious and confused and upset. I asked her what she was wearing and if she fought back and if she'd screamed. Things like that."

"That was the wrong thing to ask?"

I nodded. "It demonstrated a lack of trust, for one thing. More than that, it was suggesting that she might have wanted that to happen."

"And she didn't?" he asked innocently, not as an accusation.

"Fuck no," I said, instantly venomous.

Macy became defensive. "So you tortured the guy?"

"No, not yet. First I suggested that she report it to the police, but she didn't want to. She didn't want people to know. She didn't want to be accused of wanting it, and of course that's what would have happened." I sat down on the rocks now also, facing Macy but about eight feet from him. "As I realized that she wasn't going to report it to the police, I became increasingly...furious. I tried a lot of things to get the police involved. I went to them myself, but they didn't believe me. I tried to trick her attacker into making a recorded confession. Things like that."

Macy started to say something, probably something sympathetic, but I wanted to get through this.

I interrupted him before he could speak. "Nothing worked. Everything just kept getting worse. I wound up alone in my apartment, trying to make some sense out of everything, trying to find some way that everything could still be okay."

This time as I paused, Macy waited wordlessly.

"Eventually I thought of some kind of relief. I thought that at least, if no man could punish that asshole, at least he would have to answer to God."

"That's right," Macy said.

"That's what I *thought*. Just to reassure myself, I decided to look it up in the big book. You know, just for some comfort."

Macy smiled and nodded. This was his style.

"But then I discovered something strange. Or at least something strange to me. I looked for 'thou shalt not rape' or anything along those lines. You know what I found?"

Macy thought a bit and shrugged.

"It isn't there. Nowhere in the whole book did it say anything like 'don't rape women'."

"No," Macy said, incredulous.

"It's not there."

"It has to be."

"It doesn't have to be, and it just plain isn't."

"You just didn't look in the right place," Macy said. "It's in there."

"I looked through the whole damn thing," I said, "and it isn't there."

Macy was still incredulous.

I continued. "Twice it's mentioned. In Deuteronomy it says you shouldn't rape someone who's *engaged*, and it says that if a man is caught raping an unpledged woman he will be *fined*."

"Yeah," Macy said enthusiastically, as if that was a start.

"That's it. Nothing more. End of story." I shook my head and looked away. "And that's not even close."

Macy was quiet.

"So then I was completely dazed. If heaven was going to be a place where rapists were greeted as my equals, then I didn't want to be a part of it. I started thinking seriously about killing that bastard."

"Killing him, huh? What changed your mind?"

I smiled. "Well, while I was looking through that book I noticed a few things. The Bible is silent on the topic of rape, but it's also silent on some other topics."

"Such as?"

"Such as it doesn't say don't maim, don't blind, and most importantly—at the time—it doesn't say don't torture."

Macy was silent, full of thought.

"So then I was acting crazy. I got some hare-brained scheme to capture the guy. It was weird. Everything seemed to fall into place. He was closing up the flower shop alone. I waited for him in the dark, and when he came out I knocked him out with some ether. No one noticed. Nobody came by. I tied him up good and I took him out to my father's trailer on Lake Mohave. When he woke up, I had him tied to a chair."

"Didn't you think what you were doing was wrong?"

"No! I wasn't thinking of it that way. All that was in my mind was this asshole closing the door on Diane in the back storage room."

"And you were going to make things right by torturing the guy? Jack, two wrongs—"

"I didn't care about right and wrong. I just didn't want to see that guy get off scot-free. Nothing could make what happened to Diane right. I just wanted to make sure that something very wrong, but not technically against the Bible, happened to this clown."

For the next few moments we were silent. High above us to the north a bird was circling, riding the breeze. It could have been an eagle, or a falcon—I didn't know. I figured it was probably a vulture.

Suddenly Macy looked up at me inquisitively. "Is this why you did that in Phoenix?" he asked. "Attacked those guys?"

"I don't know," I said, shaking my head and turning away slightly. "Maybe."

Macy stared down thoughtfully at the ground, obviously searching his mind for words, thoughts, something. Silence grew between us again.

"I don't know," Macy said finally, and I believed him. "I don't know why the Bible doesn't say enough about it."

I shrugged.

"But I can't just throw the whole thing out because I don't understand some things. I mean, what then? What then? You just do what you want to and you die and that's it?" He picked some pebbles off the ground and tossed them singly at a nearby saguaro. "People make mistakes," he said. "Everybody does. So either—either we're all going to burn or—or we have to have another option. Maybe we can be forgiven. That's the way it has to be. That's the only way everything works out."

"So we should just do whatever we want, and then we'll all be forgiven and everything's okay?"

"No, you should try to follow the rules."

"Exactly," I said. "So why don't the rules say anything about Diane?"

Looking down and away, Macy was again silent. Then he had an idea. "Hey!" he said. "What about the eleventh commandment?"

"What? Thou shalt not let thy girlfriend cut thine hair?" I asked.

"No. You know, the Golden Rule."

"Those with the gold make the rules?" I knew what he was talking about. I was trying to lighten the mood.

"No," he said. "Do unto others, etcetera, etcetera." He stood up quickly, holding up one finger thoughtfully. "Just suppose for a minute that you were to make a mistake like that with—with Sharon for instance."

"A mistake like what?"

"Like suppose you did to Sharon what that guy did to Diane."

"Hmm," I said.

"I mean, that's gotta be possible, right?"

"No," I said, rather offended. "Not in a million years."

"Well, just *suppose* it was possible, and suppose you did it. Then what, Jack? Suppose it's you."

"Okay, suppose. Then what?"

"Well, then wouldn't you want me—wouldn't you want everyone—to forgive you? Isn't that what you would want us to do?"

I thought for a moment. All I could think of was Diane and how she must have felt and how she must have desperately prayed for someone to walk in. If only I'd been there. If only...

I stood up, facing Macy, looking him in the eye. "No," I said flatly. "I would want you to kill me."

"You don't mean that," he said.

"Yes, I do. I really, really do."

He threw his hands up. "That's—that's revenge mentality. Jack, that's the logic of war!"

"I know it is, Macy," I said. This time I felt not venomous, but deeply tired. "And I wish you could show me the flaw in it."

## Chapter Fourteen: Sunday Evening

It hadn't been different at all. Macy had reacted the same way everyone else had. I left him standing there on the rocks and walked back to the truck, trying to shake the memories of Diane from my head. Sharon was at the truck, rummaging through the coolers hungrily. She looked up at me. "What was all that about?" she asked.

I ignored her, picking up my sketchbook and pencil. Macy would have found out eventually. Hell, I'd planned on telling him myself eventually, on my own terms, when the time was right. She'd opened her mouth just for the hell of it, just to be the one to get a rise out of Macy. She didn't care anything about the strain it would put on our friendship.

She asked me something else, but I was ignoring her so hard that I didn't even catch the words. I wandered up the river by myself a ways, and she buggered off to ask Macy what had happened.

Opening my sketchbook, I discovered that the drawing I'd sketched earlier that was supposed to be John fishing had turned out to be mostly just Erica sitting. Sure, John was in the picture, but I'd really spent some time detailing Erica. After talking to Macy, though, I didn't feel much like drawing. I felt more like just dissolving. That's what I had hoped to do in Phoenix in the first place.

For the rest of the afternoon, I avoided Macy and Sharon because I didn't want to talk, and I kept my distance from John and Erica because I didn't want to talk. I sat mostly by myself, chasing the shade and staring into the river and the horizon. The heat sucked the energy out of my body, and I didn't feel like doing anything.

#### The Desert King

I wasn't the only one who was lethargic. Though I was away from the others, I could still see them, and even the fishermen seemed dopey. They'd cast their lines into the water and sit without moving, staring at the water, just waiting, their eyes glazed from the heat.

At one point I was leaning back against a tree, watching John and Macy fishing downriver. I basked in the sunshine—or, rather, baked in it. Closing my eyes, I dozed off for a little while, and I had the strangest dream. I was standing in my kitchen, in front of my oven, and the oven door was open. I was bending down, looking into the oven at nothing there. The heat coming out of the oven felt like it was parching my skin, singeing my eyebrows. Here I woke up from the dream, and I could still feel the oven, burning my face and hair. It was the sun.

It reminded me of Macy's monologue that night in Gridlock about the desert. About actively surviving against the sun. Spending all my time indoors in Phoenix, going from one air-conditioned place to another, I guess I'd forgotten about how hot it really was. The challenge of the desert.

So while the hours dragged past I survived actively, soaking my shirt in the river and putting it back on, lurking in the shade and the shadows, and drinking a lot of water. And I kept my eyes open for scorpions and snakes.

It seemed like forever later, but eventually the sun did begin to go down. Unlike the song, however, as the night was falling, the desert world did not begin to settle down. I counted four probably-vultures circling in the sky, scanning the long shadows of dusk for something to eat. From the surrounding vegetation came a virtual symphony of insect chirps and buzzes intermingled with the trills and whistles of some mysterious desert birds. As the sun began to set, my friends seemed perkier, and even the river seemed to bubble a bit more energetically. We all felt lively, and hungry.

We'd brought hot dogs, and after we scrounged around for some firewood we roasted them. As we ate, Sharon made small talk with Erica.

Macy and I were still avoiding each other, though we'd cooled off quite a bit, both ways.

"So what happens now?" I asked John as the condiments were being put away. "Do we go to sleep or what?"

John looked at me like I was stupid. "No way, man. Now we get out the lantern and the lawn chairs. Night fishing's the best."

"Oh, yeah, of course," I said, feeling out of place. I backed off while they got the lantern and stuff out of the truck, focusing my attention instead on the spectacular sunset panorama around us.

Far to the east, the sky was already dark with a few cold stars poking out. To the east beyond the bluff on the other side of the river, the mountains caught the last few rays of the sun, flashing a defiant memory of the afternoon. To the south and north, the long shadows of the trees and cacti created a brilliant bas relief of desert foliage. To the west, the jagged mountains stood silhouetted black against a dazzling explosion of deep orange and red, which faded and lost to the most royal of purples directly overhead.

As I committed the details and colors to memory, I made secret plans to someday get a round room with a domed ceiling and to paint this scene, to somehow capture the raw power and serenity of this scene in what could only be called *Desert Sunset Panorama*, my masterpiece.

I wanted to turn and ask Macy and John if the sun always set like this out here, but I didn't. I'd had my fill of feeling dumb for one day.

As I stood desperately memorizing every detail, I heard my fellow adventurers behind me, unfolding their chairs and clattering them into flat places among the rocks. I heard the unmistakable, rhythmic, ticking hiss of someone pumping up a gas lantern.

Overhead, the orange and red slowly lost to purple, which in turn lost to blackness and to stars. The mountains to the east joined the bas relief in surrendering to hazy gray indistinction and ultimately, to darkness.

But the memory of my *Desert Sunset Panorama* still burned vividly in my mind (and still does).

From behind me, the sound of someone striking a match was followed quickly by a flash of stark yellow light. I turned back to my compatriots. The lantern pushed back a circle of darkness with a harsh glare of light where Macy positioned it on the rocks between the truck and the river. They had arranged stones into a ring by the water's edge and built a little pyramid of firewood inside. John held a match to the tinder at the bottom of the pile, and flames licked hungrily over the dry wood. I was about to turn away when John went to the back of the truck and began clamoring for everybody's attention. "I want you all to see this," he was saying.

Immediately he had Macy and Erica's attention. Sharon and I looked on without as much zeal. John held one of his duffel bags in one hand. With his other hand he rummaged through the bag. "I went the whole day without saying anything," he said, "hoping she'd think I forgot."

Erica grabbed his arm. "Oh, John, stop. It's not that important."

"Now, wait," John said. "I just want everybody to see what I got you for your twenty-third birthday."

Macy leaned back and howled enthusiastically. Sharon and I looked at each other. Sharon glanced back at Macy and rolled her eyes. I agreed.

"I was going to get you a card and a cake," John continued, "but I figured they'd get pretty beat up riding out here in my duffel bag." I grinned. Sharon smiled. Erica chuckled. Macy guffawed. John found what he was looking for in his duffel bag and pulled it out. "For your birthday, I decided to get you something practical," he said, handing her a small rectangular box about as long as her hand and as wide as three fingers.

"What is it?" she asked. "Can I shake it?"

"Why don't you just open it?" John said.

"Oh, John. Really, you shouldn't have. My birthday's nothing special." She was smiling, and probably blushing, but it was hard to tell in the light of the lantern and the still-small campfire.

"Everything about you is special to me," John said.

#### T. F. Torrey

This was getting entirely too syrupy. I wished she would just open the damn box. It was only a pen and pencil set or something. Hardly worth the discussion.

Suddenly John's head snapped around and he peered into the darkness downriver.

"What—" started Macy.

"Shh!" John said, holding up his hand. "Listen!" He frowned intently downriver, head tipped slightly to the side.

We all looked into the darkness, listening. I couldn't hear anything but the bubbling river, punctuated by an occasional snap from the fire. I looked at the others. Only John appeared to hear anything.

As I wondered what we were supposed to be hearing, John started walking away, apparently sensing something on the riverbank some distance away. He quickly moved out of the circle of light into the darkness. Cautiously, we followed. About thirty feet away, he stopped, looking carefully at the ground. Curious, we moved up to him as he crouched and picked something up.

"What is it?" Erica asked.

"Scorpion," John said, turning and holding it up toward us.

Erica and Sharon jumped back, but not without me.

"Eww," Sharon said.

"Cool," Macy said, stepping forward to look.

John held the small scorpion by its tail between his thumb and forefinger. It stretched out its pincers, trying to get an angle on whatever was holding it. John didn't give it a chance to get a grip. With a quick flick of his wrist, he threw it backhand up the riverbank away from us. It arced up away, quickly disappearing into the darkness.

"Wow," I said. "You heard that all the way over there?" I'd been impressed before, but this was almost superhuman.

"Yep," John said. We all started walking back to the truck and the light.

"Why didn't you kill it?" Sharon asked. "It might come back later."

John looked at her patiently. "There are scorpions and snakes all over out here," he said. "If you aren't careful, it doesn't matter how many you kill."

"Yeah," Macy agreed.

"Besides," John said, "scorpion stings aren't much worse than bee stings."

"Some of them are," Erica interjected. "I've seen some bad ones."

"Let's just forget about the scorpions," John said, smiling, as we got back to the truck, "and remember my present."

Erica still held the box in her hands. She, too, resumed smiling.

"Open it," John said.

I was still thinking about how amazing it was that John had heard the scorpion.

"Yeah, open it," Macy said.

She opened it, and her smile flickered. It was just for a second, but I noticed.

So did John. "You don't like it," he said.

"Oh, John, yes I do," she said, smiling with new energy. "I've never gotten anything like this before." She pulled the gift out of its box. It was a knife, a white handled folding knife with both ends silver tipped and gleaming like fire in the lantern light. "It's...really nice, John."

"You bet it is," Macy said, unable to restrain himself any longer. "You can open that baby with one hand."

"One hand?" I asked. "I thought that was illegal."

"No," scoffed Macy. "No way."

"Well, yeah," John said.

"Really?" Macy asked.

"You gave me an *illegal* knife," Erica said, shocked, "for my birthday?"

"You gave her a *knife* for her birthday?" Sharon asked.

"Wait a second," John said. "It's not illegal to carry the knife, and it's not illegal to own it." "How about to give one as a gift?" Sharon asked.

John glared at her. "If she was to attack someone with it, then it would be considered an illegal weapon. But it's not illegal just to have it."

"What if the police caught her with it?" Sharon asked.

"How would they do that?" John asked.

"Well, suppose they asked her for her driver's license, and while she was getting it, they saw the knife in her purse and they said 'what's that?"

"Then she could just show it to them," he said. "She'd just have to make sure she used both hands to open it."

"And they wouldn't arrest her?"

"No," John stated flatly.

"But what if she was drunk and speeding?"

John ignored her, turning back to Erica. "Just don't kill anybody with it," he said.

I wasn't clear on the legality of the knife, and I kept quiet. But I was sure that she wouldn't get caught killing anybody with it. Not Erica.

Erica was puzzled. "Why did you get me a knife?" she asked.

"Because it's handy in the desert, and I like to be prepared," John said. "We've been coming out here a lot lately."

There followed a thoughtful pause.

"You could clean fish with it," Macy said.

"Yes," John agreed, "or cut steak with it."

"You could cut the claws off of crabs with it," Macy said.

"Or you could butter bread with it," John said.

"You could gut a deer with it," Macy said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Erica said, smiling at their competition. "It's a very handy, versatile knife, John. Thank you."

"I wanted to get you something special, something that symbolizes our relationship, what we do together. And something practical."

Sharon laughed rudely. "And you got her a knife instead, right?"

John ignored her.

"How do you open it with one hand?" I asked.

"It's as easy as saying it," John said. He took the knife from Erica and held it up in front of him. As he did, the blade flew open with a snap, cold and gleaming in the light of the lantern and the campfire.

Erica jumped. Macy smiled wide. "Wow," Sharon said, genuinely impressed.

John closed the blade and showed us how it worked. "You see this metal tab on the back end of the blade?" he asked.

Of course we did.

"It's part of the blade," he explained. "So you just pull it around with your index finger and it pivots the blade out and locks into the handle, locking the blade in place. Like this."

The blade appeared with a metallic snap, gleaming wickedly in the firelight.

Erica thought that was neat. She took the knife from John, closed the blade, and snapped it open just like he had. Everybody beamed. She did it a few more times, practicing. She liked it, but she was a bit more ginger with it, a bit more careful and apprehensive than John had been.

"Be careful," John warned. "That blade is sharp enough to shave with."

She assured him that she would be.

"My knife's sharp, too," Macy said suddenly. He searched in his pocket for a second and frowned. "I must have left it in the truck. It's one of those Swiss Army types with all kinds of blades so you're prepared for *anything*." He smiled wide, with lots of teeth.

John smiled gently. "I like to keep things simple," he said.

Macy's smile went away. "Oh," he said. Suddenly he perked up again. "Hey," he said. "Let's do some fishing."

That seemed like a good idea to everyone but me. I felt like drawing again. While they were readying their gear, Erica put the knife away. First she tucked it into her front hip pocket. Then she bent over to pick

#### T. F. Torrey

up her fishing rod and stood up in a rush, as if snapping to attention. I stepped back quickly, paranoid, afraid of a snake or something. Then I saw her, clearly blushing this time, take the knife from her front pocket and put it into her back pocket.

I pretended not to notice. I got out my sketchbook and pencils and figured to put down some details of *Desert Sunset Panorama* in the light of the gas lantern.

That didn't work. Macy claimed the lantern and toted it away as he and Sharon headed upriver, where they had been earlier. John and Erica made their way through the underbrush downriver in darkness, leaving me alone at the fire with three lawn chairs. I wondered why they'd bothered to dig the lawn chairs out in the first place, but not for long. Right away I kicked back in one of the chairs, sketchbook comfortably in my lap.

For a while in the flickering firelight, I sketched some notes for painting my *Desert Sunset Panorama*. Because I was drawing only in pencil, I had to denote the colors with words, but I got the memory down all right anyway.

Turning then to my previous drawing of John fishing and Erica watching, I noted again that it was more Erica than anything else. I worked on it for a while, filling in details. But when I was done it was still mostly Erica. Erica was a fine subject, and maybe good for another time, but I wanted this drawing to be about the master fisherman. Even in the firelight, though, I could see it was quite far off. I'd fix it later.

By then I was lonely. I really felt like talking to somebody, anybody. I started to walk upriver, toward Macy and Sharon. Within a few steps, however, I spotted the glow of the lantern reflecting off the bluff. It was at least a hundred yards upriver, and I didn't want to walk that far in the dark. I suspected that John and Erica hadn't gone too far without a light, so I turned and walked downriver toward them.

After I'd walked only a few cautious steps in the darkness, I found a kind of rocky path through the underbrush and decided to follow it.

I thought about calling out to them, but thought better of it. The hot breeze whispered in my ears, mingling with the bubbling of the river over the rocks. The night was peacefully quiet, and I didn't want to ruin the ambiance with a bunch of mindless yelling.

Above me the stars blazed through the clear night, and the moon was just edging over the rim of the bluff. The moon, approaching full, looked so crisp and large that it seemed I could have reached out and touched it, perhaps from the top of Chalk Mountain.

I walked on. Now I was beginning to think that they might have followed this path quite a ways. Suddenly I heard something soft as a kitten's purr, and somehow strangely familiar, drifting faintly through the desert air.

Looking quickly around for scorpions or snakes, I sat down on the rocks where I was.

Recognizing the noise, I felt memories washing over my mind like waves over a sandy beach on a summer night. Memories of a nuzzle, a caress, hot breath on my neck, teeth hard and soft in the flesh of my shoulder. I remembered hair in my palm, tangled through my fingers. The taste of her mouth, her fingertips. The smell of the sweat when I kissed under her breasts.

That music on the breeze was Erica, softly moaning. And that sound, with the hot breeze on my face and the moon bright above me, brought back the intimate memories of the sweet music she had made when I held her.

It was just one night, a long time ago, and afterward we'd felt too awkward and foolish to try to see each other again.

That one night, she'd stopped into Gridlock with her boyfriend and some female friend of hers. I noticed when her boyfriend left with her friend. And after a while I noticed that they weren't coming back.

She stayed there drinking and thinking until I closed up the place. She wanted me to call her a taxi. I offered to give her a lift myself. On the way to her place she told me about her boyfriend, how he was an intern at the VA hospital where she was a nurse, and how he had dumped her for her friend.

I lent a sympathetic ear as I drove her home, and we wound up talking late into the night about love and life. When silence finally fell over us, we felt like old friends sitting side-by-side on her couch. I was thinking about leaving when I felt her hand on top of mine. I looked into her eyes, and she didn't have to say a thing. I knew what she was thinking.

I didn't even find out her name until just before I left her place that night. I felt kind of bad. She'd been dumped and had enough to drink to let her guard down. And I'd let her make that mistake. Just like friends don't.

I could have conned myself and said she was lucky that she'd hooked up with me and not someone who would use her and not let her forget it, but some part of me wouldn't let me forget that I'd played the wolf. I'd started out my association with her by taking advantage of her. Though I'd found myself attracted to her, how could I turn that into something that would last?

I had never expected to see her again, though now and then I'd thought about her. She hadn't stopped into Gridlock anymore after that. I'd always hoped that she'd wind up with someone who was really good for her. I wasn't sure why. Probably guilt.

Seeing her now with John Lupo made me glad for her. Something about that—seeing her with someone who was good for her, and good to her—something about that gave me back some ability to feel hopeful about the world. There was some kind of simple justice in seeing this beautiful girl get something special in return.

Seeing them together, hearing them now over the bubbling river and the whispering wind, gave me a peaceful easy feeling about life and the world.

I just hoped that my one night with Erica wouldn't ruin their chances for happiness. And I really hoped that John would never find out, or if he did, that he would be sympathetic, not suspicious. But I'll never forget the way she moaned. Good or bad, right or wrong, I'll never forget it.

### Chapter Fifteen: Desert at Night

Unknown to the desert neophytes, and unseen by all, a myriad of life unfolded quietly in the desert evening.

Various insects came out to do whatever it is that they did at night. Bats came out of secret places to eat the flying bugs, and lizards and mice came out to eat the crawling insects. Snakes and owls came out to eat the mice and lizards.

And, unseen, upriver a bit, a pair of human hunters decided to have a bit of fun going after a somewhat larger game.

The cycle of life revolved on the ground, as the stars wheeled overhead.

The Desert King

# Part III: Monday

# Chapter Sixteen: Monday Morning

"Jack, get up."

"Huh, what?" Bright light. Rocks. Grit. Dry mouth. Cold.

"Jack, get up. We have to talk."

"Mmm," I said, rousing a bit, shaking my head. It was the desert. It was cold. It was bright. I was sleeping on the ground. I'd forgotten.

I squinted at the figure standing between me and the sun. The figure with the hat and the cold steel eyes. "John?" I asked.

"Get up, Jack," he said. Of course it was John Lupo. His voice was calm, firm, low, controlled, and entirely unfriendly. Even as the cobwebs of sleep fell away from my brain, I could tell what his problem was. It could only be one thing.

Erica had narced.

I stood up slowly, stretching. I was stiff and cramped all over. Rocks make bad bedmates. I had slept next to the fire, but it had died down, and the night had been chilly. The sun was up in the east, lifting over the bluff as the moon had done the night before, but the day wasn't old enough to be warm yet. I shivered and stretched as the tendrils of a dream left my mind.

Looking around, I first noticed that everyone else was already awake. Sharon scrounged through the coolers for some breakfast. Macy, wasting no time, had his line in the water, his pole angled over a notched stick on the rocks. Then I noticed that John held my sketchbook in his left hand. With my stomach turning cold, I remembered that I'd fallen asleep while working on my drawing of John fishing.

"This is a nice drawing of my girlfriend, Jack," he said.

"Actually," I explained, "it's supposed to be you, fishing."

"Uh, huh," he said, sarcasm thick in his voice. "I guess I am in the picture a bit."

Macy looked back at us, concerned about what might be going on. As I met his gaze, he wisely turned back to the water, deliberately studying his line. Sharon ignored us from the truck.

"Let's go talk, Jack," John said. He turned and walked away, still carrying my sketchbook, going down the rocky path I'd followed downstream the night before. I followed him. I expected him to move just out of earshot of the others, but John surprised me. He'd already surprised me by being so cool and calm in the knowledge of what had happened with Erica and me. Now he surprised me by leading me more than a hundred yards downstream.

Through the dense growth of mesquite and other bushes, even along the rocky trail, it took us several minutes to navigate that hundred yards along the riverbank. As we walked I gathered my composure. He walked quietly, not saying anything and not making any noise on the rocks, either. My own feet clattered over the rocks as I staggered along trying to keep up. I wondered what he planned on doing. He could have been leading me to my death. And I was following him, trying hard to keep up.

I couldn't believe Erica had told him. I couldn't believe she had had to tell him here, in the desert. Sometime later would have been a thousand times better. A million times. Here in the desert I felt so completely defenseless. And John was perfectly at home.

Then we were in sight of Erica. She sat with her back to us at a tiny bit of a clearing by the river, tossing pebbles into the water. For some reason—any reason—she didn't look up as we approached, though I was sure she had heard my footsteps.

#### The Desert King

John stopped walking at the clearing and turned back to me, facing me squarely.

This was it. Time was now. Showdown.

Before he could begin, I decided to set the record straight. I could make it clear that I wasn't interested so there was nothing to even talk about. "Look," I said, "what happened with Erica and me was a long time ago."

John was shocked and surprised. He'd opened his mouth to say something. Now it just hung open.

Erica's head snapped around toward us, and her face went white.

I felt surprised, and suddenly alone, and very, very, very stupid. Erica hadn't narced on me. I had just narced on myself.

"I was bringing you out here because I wanted you to see this sunrise scene," John said. "I thought you might like to paint it." He looked back and forth at Erica and me, disbelief all over his face. "What's going on here?"

"John," Erica began, getting to her feet, "it really was a long time ago."

"Wait!" I said. "I was only joking. Nothing happened. Nothing. It was supposed to be funny." I forced a laugh.

John's fishing vest had fallen away from his left shoulder. He wore no shirt underneath. A double row of pink dashes showed clearly on his flesh. The teeth hard and soft on his shoulder. With effort, I denied myself the urge to reminisce.

John closed his mouth and stared at me. I knew he'd seen me looking at the bite marks. He didn't look angry. He didn't look upset. He stared at me with his face a calm mask of accusation, lips tight together, only the faintest traces of hurt and recollection glowing in his eyes, shining in the shadow of the brim of his hat, slung low against the morning sun. He was so calm he scared me. I didn't know what to say. Erica, too, was quiet. A thousand words raced through my head. A thousand ideas. But it seemed I'd said too much already, and nothing I could say was I going to change the past. Nothing.

"I never meant for this to happen," I said. Of course I hadn't. I kept remembering how easily he'd handled the dog, the drunks, the snake. The dog in one hand easily by the throat, feet kicking, claws catching nothing, eyes wild.

John turned away from me like I was insignificant. He stared at Erica, silently questioning her actions and motives.

"Please don't be angry, John," she said. She looked into my eyes. "It was nothing special, really."

Ouch.

She moved toward John, ready to embrace. "I just didn't want you to misunderstand."

"Oh, I think I understand perfectly," John said, dodging her arms. "The drawing, the looks." He paced away a bit and turned back to her. "You must think I'm a fool."

"No, John, really-" Erica said, stepping toward him again.

"No," he said, interrupting her and stepping away. He shook his head and looked off at the beautiful sunrise, fathoms of disappointment in his eyes. The pause was only brief, but with my heart stopped it seemed much longer. Finally he looked at me again. "You can have her," he said calmly.

Erica and I could only look at each other. John walked out of the clearing, away from the river, out toward the open desert. In a flash I had visions of John walking back to the truck and taking Macy and Sharon and leaving us. We were a long, long way from civilization.

And, just for a moment, I thought it would be nice for Erica to be mine.

That passed.

Erica went after John. She was right on his heels as he walked away. I thought I might leave them alone, then I thought better of it. Beautiful as she was, she was right. We had to straighten this one out.

"John, please let me explain," she was saying. He ignored her and kept walking. I followed them at a distance. "It's not what you think," she said.

"It's not?" he asked, still walking.

"No, it's not. What happened was a long time ago. I haven't seen him since then. I had no idea he would be here this weekend."

He kept walking, but more slowly. She'd gotten through. Or started to, anyway.

"It was only one night," she said, sensing progress. "It was long before I ever met you."

Bingo. He stopped walking away and turned back toward her.

"Okay," he said. "Tell me about it."

She stopped in front of him and took a deep breath. "Remember the guy I was seeing last year?" she asked.

"Jeff what's-his-name?"

"Yeah, that's him. Well, the night he dumped me we were out having a drink with my friend Cindy."

"The one you said he took off with."

"Right. After they left the bar that night, I stayed there and had quite a few more drinks." She paused for words, and for strength. I could tell it wasn't easy for her to talk about this kind of thing. This wasn't her style. John waited patiently for her to continue. "I got pretty tipsy," she said. "At closing time I asked the bartender to call me a cab, but he said he'd give me a ride home."

John flashed me an icy glance, chilly in the morning sun. "He'd save you a few dollars?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"So then what?" he asked, looking back at her.

"So he took me back to my apartment, and we were talking for a while, and ..." her voice trailed off.

"One thing leads to another," John said.

"Yeah," Erica said, looking down at the ground. "When I woke up the next morning, I wanted to die."

There followed an uncomfortable pause. I really had never meant to become the heel. But I sure was one now. I felt very small.

"I didn't see him again until yesterday. I didn't even know his last name."

Very small indeed.

"After that I met you," Erica continued, looking back up at John again. "Everything was so perfect. I didn't want to ruin it. I didn't want you to think...I was a tramp."

"I don't," he said, his face softening, reaching out to take her hands in his. "I think you're a princess."

They embraced, quickly. Then John turned his attention to me. "That explains the looks," he said, "but what about the drawing?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Why are you using this trip to draw my girl, Jack? Do you still want her?"

At least she was "his girl" again. I shook my head. "I just like to draw beautiful things," I said. "She deserves the best, John. She deserves you."

That worked.

Lots of people will tell you that flattery will get you nowhere. Don't believe them. I think they're just trying to keep it to themselves. In my experience, flattery is like a Visa card: it will get you everywhere you want to be.

John and Erica embraced again. This time it dragged on and on, and then they were kissing and I was entirely too close at ten feet away. I decided that the big Q&A was over, and before things got too intense, I'd better leave. I was hungry. I would go join Macy and Sharon for breakfast gruel.

As I was turning away, movement behind John and Erica caught my attention. A hundred feet or so on the other side of them, a man stepped into sight. He was followed quickly by another. The vegetation grew thin away from the river, but they were too obscured to see very clearly. I *could* see that both men carried rifles slung over their shoulders. I doubted they were fishing. Were they poachers? Were they *the* poachers?

The first one spotted John and Erica, who were still swapping spit in front of me. He elbowed his buddy and pointed in our direction. They both stopped walking and looked at us.

I hadn't seen the poachers clearly the day before, but these guys looked much bigger. These guys were huge. Goliath and Goliath. Their skin was dark, tanned golden by the sun. They wore hats, brown like John's outback, but with wide brims and rounded tops. In the shadows under their hats they wore dark sunglasses, further protection against the desert sun, and against identification.

They spoke quickly back and forth, but they were too far away for me to even catch a murmur of what they said. John and Erica were still kissing, unaware of them and apparently of me. I didn't want to be the one to stop the reunion, but I just might have to.

Then the maybe-poachers were moving again. They took their rifles off their shoulders and took a couple steps forward, toward us.

"Um," I said.

For a second I thought they were going to continue on their way, that they'd unslung their rifles for better balance on fragile footing. For just a second, I *thought* everything would be fine.

Then one of the hunters dropped to one knee. And they both raised their rifles to their shoulders.

"Um," I said.

And the sun glinted off their barrels as they leveled the sights at John and Erica and me.

I launched myself at John and Erica, hitting them with my shoulder to knock them out of the way.

They were warm. And startled.

Just as I hit them, twin shots cracked from the hunters' rifles.

### Chapter Seventeen: It Gets Hotter

Even as the three of us fell onto the cool desert sand, I had to admire John's instinct for self-preservation. As we fell he rolled to the side, catching Erica on his left arm and catching me on his right.

Erica landed softly on his arm on the sand.

John landed deliberately on the sand between us.

I landed on John's right elbow, which he'd positioned firmly in my solar plexus.

With a twang and a whine, the bullets ricocheted off the bluff behind us. John and I rolled to all fours. I was gasping for breath. He was positioned on top of Erica, who was on her back on the sand, shielding her with his body. She liked it.

A slight dune in front of us prevented us from seeing them. And them from shooting us. Temporarily.

"What the hell was that?" John demanded.

"Poachers," I said.

"Poachers?" Erica's eyes went wide. Now we could hear footsteps scrabbling over the rocks, coming toward us. "Were they shooting at us?" She grabbed John's left arm apprehensively.

As if to answer, another gunshot boomed and the bullet spat sand over the dune into our faces.

"Shit!" I said, ducking.

"We have to get out of here!" Erica said, her voice everything but calm.

"Great," I said. "How?"

John grabbed a rock in one hand. "Follow me when I move," he said. He was already moving, rising to one knee, drawing his right arm back. He heaved the rock smoothly over the dune at the poachers.

We heard the soft thud as the rock found its mark. Another shot cracked over our heads and shattered against the cliff across the river.

"Let's go!" John shouted.

He took off on a dead sprint, dragging Erica by the hand. I sped along behind them. All three of us ducked low as we ran back down to the clearing by the river, where John turned right, following the rocky path downstream.

A shot echoed off the bluff as we exited the clearing. Under cover of the riverside vegetation, we rushed down the path.

Suddenly John drew up short, stopping behind a willow tree and peering back in the direction of our attackers.

Erica and I leaned our forearms against the smooth bark, panting. "Why were they shooting at us?" Erica asked.

"I don't know," John said.

"Did they think we were deer?"

John shook his head. "They were too close. They knew what they were doing."

"What are we going to do?" I asked.

"We're going to wait here," John said. "The next move is theirs."

"What if they come after us?"

"We run. If they go around left, we'll go upriver. If they follow the way we came, we'll keep going downriver."

"What if they split up?"

"Then we'll have to take one of them out."

Of course! "Why don't you just shoot back?" I asked.

He shot me a disgusted glance. "I left my gun in the truck!" "Shit!" I said. Shit, indeed.

John's eyes focused on a point through the bushes to our right. "Here comes one," he said suddenly, his voice hushed.

"One or both?" I whispered back.

"Can't tell."

Then we could hear the footsteps on the path. The attacker trotted down the path toward us, twenty yards away and closing fast.

"Let's go!" John said.

We sprinted away down the trail. Immediately a rifle cracked behind us. The shot went high and wide, exploding into a saguaro. We fled through the spray of cactus splinters.

"Around the bend, around the bend," I heard John saying. He was ducking low, dragging Erica by the hand. Ahead of us about twenty yards the trail curved right along the river. Around the corner, we'd be out of the gunner's sights. If we were lucky, he couldn't run and rearm his rifle at the same time.

Apparently he could, but it took some time. Just as we got to the bend, another shot cracked behind us. The bullet glanced off the river to our left, sending a fine plume of water high into the breeze.

The trail went on, and so did we. To our left, the river bubbled merrily, cold to our desperate plight. To our right, the terrain rose from the river, going to a small hilltop about fifty yards away. I figured that we could outrun the gunman, because he had to slow down to cock his rifle and aim. But I wondered where the other poacher was, and how long our luck would hold.

Not long.

We were about two-thirds of the way to the next turn, forty or fifty feet away from it, when the second poacher appeared on the hilltop to our right. I saw him lift his rifle to his shoulder and heard the pop of its report.

#### T. F. Torrey

The rocks to our right front exploded and Erica went down. Her hand slipped away from John's as she fell in a heap on the path. I was running so headlong that I almost ran over her.

I saw blood and feared the worst.

She lay on her left side and clutched her right calf with both hands. Blood stained the leg of her jumpsuit and her fingers.

John stopped in his tracks. "Erica! Are you okay?"

She shook her head. Her hat had fallen off, and her hair was all in her face, which was contorted into a mask of pain.

"Are you shot?" John asked.

She shook her head again. "Hit with a rock."

A shot rang out behind us, and we ducked reflexively as another spray of rocks and gravel exploded to our left. The poacher behind us had us in his sights again.

We half-dragged, half-helped Erica to her feet and tried to run. Before we got four more steps, the poacher on the hill fired again, shattering stones in the path ahead of us.

"Over here!" John shouted. We dived into a shallow depression among the mounds of sand on the hillside. It wasn't much, but it was cover for the moment.

"We can't just hide here," I said.

"We can't get out, Jack," John said. "They've got us caught in a crossfire!"

For several moments nothing happened.

"What are they doing?" Erica asked.

"They're waiting for us to run, so they can shoot us," John said.

"Why are they doing this?" Erica asked.

"I don't know," John said.

"We can't just wait here for them!" I said.

"What are we going to do?" Erica asked.

John put it simply: "We have to take one of them out."

"How?" I asked. "They have all the guns."

"I'll show you," John said.

"John, don't be stupid," I said. I'd seen the dog bit and the fight bit and the rattlesnake bit. But these guys had guns, and they knew how to use them.

"I know what I'm doing," he said, then he added soberly, "If I get caught up, take Erica and run downriver and keep going till the shooting stops."

"We can't just leave you here," Erica said.

"I'll be just fine," he said. And he meant it.

He picked up a fist-sized rock from the ground beside us, took a deep breath, and started to get up.

"Wait!" Erica said suddenly.

"What?" John said, a bit irritated.

Erica looked hurt. "Kiss for luck?"

John smiled. He moved over and kissed her, slowly.

Here—against tact and discipline, despite all logical reasoning, and in defiance of several important survival instincts—I felt a pang of envy as they kissed. When they separated and John got ready to attack, Erica looked at me. I thought she saw the jealousy there.

But there wasn't time to think of it. John leapt to his feet and charged up the hill.

Erica and I quickly crawled to the edge of the depression, where we could watch the action. We watched as he zigged through the bushes, zagged among the cacti. Erica glared at me, accusation in her eyes. "If you're hoping they'll get him," she said, "I'll kill you myself."

Before I could say anything, the poacher on the path behind us fired. John's crazy dash had surprised him, though, and the shot hit nothing.

The other poacher wasn't so easily fooled. With my heart in my throat, I watched as he tracked John in his sights. I saw the rifle kick into his shoulder as he squeezed the trigger.

And I watched as the shot splintered a cactus and John kept on charging.

Suddenly John stopped, cocked his arm back, and hurled the rock at the poacher on the hill. Stationary men are better targets. The poacher saw the rock coming. He tried to dodge it. He fell down in a pile as it pounded against his leg.

And John was charging again, going for the kill before the poacher could regain his feet. Another shot cracked in the desert air, puffing into the ground right in front of John. The poacher behind us was trying to cut off John's attack.

Then the poacher on the hill came up on one knee. John was still too far away! Erica grabbed my arm desperately as the hilltop poacher brought the rifle up to his shoulder.

John abruptly changed course, plunging back down the hill, zigzagging toward the bend. "Let's go!" he shouted.

We went.

Erica and I jumped to our feet and headed for the curve. She was limping, but limping quickly. I didn't know if they'd noticed that we were fleeing, but I wasn't looking back to find out.

Another shot boomed, and the bullet struck the river, spraying water high into the air like a fountain.

And we made it. Another shot blasted, missing everything and ricocheting off the bluff.

John caught up to us and never slowed, grabbing Erica's other arm and pulling her along. They couldn't see us anymore, but we kept on going. They could run, too.

A short distance later, the path dissolved into a mess of water bushes.

"Great," I said. "What do we do now?"

"Take another path," John said.

"Where? We'll be too slow through those bushes. They'll get us for sure." "We'll cross the river. It's not too deep here."

"I don't—" Erica began.

"Then what?" I asked. "We'd be sitting ducks against that bluff."

"We'll climb up one of the washes," John said.

"Then if they try to follow us we can bomb them with rocks!" I said excitedly, glad John was on my side. "Ready?" I asked.

"Wait!" Erica said. "I don't think they're following us anymore."

We scanned the hillside. No sign of them.

"Just because we can't see them doesn't mean they're not sneaking up on us," I said.

"Why would they be sneaking when they think we're running?" she asked.

She had a good point. We listened, but we heard nothing. No rushing footsteps. No crashing through the vegetation. Nothing.

"What's going on?" I asked John.

He shrugged. "Maybe they figured out they can't catch us."

"Maybe they ran out of bullets," Erica suggested.

"I doubt it," John said.

"Then what are they doing?" she asked.

What, indeed? And why were we waiting to find out? "Couldn't we figure this out on the other side of the river?" I asked.

"I can't—" Erica began.

"Shhh!" John interrupted.

Then we all heard it: the whining growl of a truck starting. The roar of its engine echoed heartily off the bluff to us, confusing the direction and distance. I couldn't tell if the truck was our attackers' or Macy's.

"Is that their truck or Macy's?" Erica asked, as though she was reading my mind.

"Theirs," John said.

"Are they going away?" Erica asked.

"Can't tell yet," he said.

"Do you think they're going downriver to try to cut us off?" I asked.

"Maybe," John said.

"What else could they do?" Erica asked.

"Lots," John said.

We let that sink in. From over the hill and off the bluff came the rumbling of their engine. As we listened, the sound slowly diminished. John squinted, concentrating.

"They're moving away," he said.

"Are they leaving us alone?" Erica asked.

John cocked his head, listening intently. Suddenly his eyes opened wide. "They're going for *our* truck!"

"Oh, shit!" I said.

Erica finished the thought: "Macy and Sharon!"

"Let's go!" John shouted.

We were already going.

Back over the rocky path we flew. John raced ahead, nimble as a cat. I had to go slower because I was less sure of my footing. Erica ran slower still, hobbling on her hit leg.

One hundred yards to go.

I wondered what we were going to do when we got there. They still had guns and we still didn't. The sound of their engine got louder as we approached. The sound floated heavy in the desert morning air.

Fifty yards.

The noise quit suddenly, but the echoes lingered like a nightmare in the morning. John slowed his approach, looking for any sign of the poachers. Erica and I began to catch up to him.

Thirty yards.

The pair of vehicles and the two poachers came into view. They had parked some distance from Macy's truck, back up on the path we had driven in on. They stood in front of their Ram, aiming deliberately at our truck, and fired another pair of shots. There was no sign of Macy or Sharon

John stopped, stooped, and came up with a rock in his hand. The rock arced, coldly graceful, through the air. It smashed a jagged hole through the Ram's passenger window, but they didn't notice it at all, because just then Macy's truck exploded into a fireball.

It wasn't like in the movies. The noise wasn't a boom, but more of a rapidly escalating, deep, throaty roar. Probably only a few seconds elapsed, but every instant carved slowly into my mind. I stood about fifty feet away. The sun and adrenaline had already heated the air; the explosion heated it more. For a brief moment, I wondered how hot it would get, where it would stop. Hot enough to set my clothes on fire?

The flaming fragments of our duffel bags tumbled from the sky to the sand. A couple of fishing rods flipped into the river.

I did the full-body flinch, like a rodent, and the sheer psychological impact knocked me down on my right side. John kept his balance, crouching like a wildcat.

So did the poachers.

Out of the corners of their eyes, or somehow, they saw us. They whirled, cocking their rifles, us in their sights.

Some kind of calculating determination showed on John's face as he turned on his heel and sprinted back toward Erica and me. I didn't have any problem regaining my feet to join him in fleeing. We grabbed Erica's arms and rushed as fast as we could back down the rocky path. I thought we were doomed when I heard the shots ring out behind us, but nobody fell and we made it out of sight of the poachers.

The only noises I could hear were our feet on the rocks and Macy's truck burning. It seemed that we were all alone in a crazy game in the big desert.

And they were winning.

Erica was limping badly now. "We can't go much farther like this," I said. "They'll catch us easily."

"No they won't," John said. He stopped running, halting us with him, and looked back up the trail.

"We'll be lucky to—" I began.

"Shhh!" John interrupted.

Then we all heard it: the sound of the poachers' truck. The engine growled, and gravel crunched under its tires.

"They're moving again-"

"Shhh!" John held up a hand.

And we heard the approach of someone on the rocks.

"They've split up!" John said.

Good or bad?

"Shit!" Erica said. "They're going to get us from both sides!"

Bad. Very bad.

"What now?" I whispered to John.

The poacher on foot was coming toward us slowly, carefully. He'd be in sight soon. The truck rumbled down toward the end of the path.

"No choice," John said. "We're crossing the river." He stepped toward the water.

Erica pulled her arm back in his grip. "We can't."

He frowned back at her. "We have to."

"We *can't*," she insisted, her voice rising into a panic. "I can't swim!" Fine time to find out.

## Chapter Eighteen: Thorns and Miles

"This," I said to Erica, "is a fine time to find that out."

"Well, Jack," she shot back, fire in her eyes, "there's not a lot I can do about the timing."

"Sounds like there's not much you can do about anything," I returned.

"Yeah, Jack, like you're a real master of the desert."

"At least I can swim."

"You're not going to have to," John interrupted. He had stepped into the edge of the water, and he beckoned for us to follow. "It's wide here, but not very deep, probably not even up past your waist."

Erica strutted past me to the water.

"Come on," John said. "That dude will be here in no time."

John was already a quarter of the way across, hurrying as best he could. Erica followed him closely, slightly more downriver than he was. I plunged in after them. The current was surprisingly strong. It pushed me downstream behind Erica.

It seemed to take forever to get across. John and I kept sneaking glances back over our shoulders. The poacher was coming cautiously through the brush, afraid of being tricked or ambushed. The timing was going to be close.

Then Erica was gone. I glanced back at the riverbank behind us and when I looked forward she was gone. Nothing but water between me and John. "Shit!" I shouted. "John!"

He noticed right away what the problem was. "Erica!" he yelled.

The surface of the water broke between us. Erica's head popped into the air briefly, her eyes wild with terror. I noticed, and hated myself for it, that with her wet hair all in her face she was beautiful.

She coughed and gasped and was gone again. Sank like a stone.

I scrambled, wading toward her, splashing the water trying to paddle myself faster. John dove in where he was.

It seemed like they were down there forever. John's hat floated lazily in his ringed wake. As I splashed closer, I wondered if she'd gotten stuck. I wondered if seaweed grew in desert streams. I even wondered how I might help when I got there. "Not deep at all," I muttered. "Probably not even up past your waist."

Then, with a rush, John was swimming on the surface, dragging Erica behind him.

Just then I slipped into the same hole Erica had. I found it surprising, and surprisingly cold. Strangely, under the surface of the cold water, I realized that John hadn't stepped into this hole. Only Erica and I had. We hadn't been following him exactly.

But at least I could swim.

I got twisted around coming back to the surface and emerged facing the riverbank we'd just left.

The poacher was there. He was smiling.

I plunged back under the surface as he squeezed the trigger. Even under the water I felt the shock as the bullet hit the water, spraying a trail of bubbles down past my face.

Many things focus the mind, among them homicidal poachers hunting you down like some kind of big game. With clarion consciousness I swam underwater to the place where I remembered the wash meeting the river. I didn't hear another gunshot. I wondered if he could track me below the surface.

He could.

As my head came up, the cannon boomed again. The bullet thwacked the water and ricocheted off the bluff next to my head.

Erica was already scrambling up the wash. John climbed ahead of her. I pulled myself out of the water. The narrow passage was at best a couple feet deep, but it angled into the face of the bluff. By squeezing into it, we could be out of the poacher's sights. So press I did, tightly up against Erica's legs.

"Jack, stop it!" she said.

"Get going!" I said urgently.

She stepped on my shoulder and my head and climbed higher.

Bushes clung to the sides of the wash, creosote bushes or mesquite bushes or some kind. They made great handholds, as long as you didn't mind the thorns. I didn't mind.

I also didn't mind the constant pelting as John and Erica knocked loose rocks onto my head and shoulders. I ignored the pain because the truck had stopped again. The riverside poacher was moving downriver to where he could get us in his sights again.

As we climbed higher, the rocks took longer and longer to splash into the water.

John reached the top of the wash and scrambled over the rim of the bluff to safety. Erica still had eight feet to climb.

"Get going!" I shouted.

"I am going, Jack!"

"Faster!" I'd be in their sights any second.

"I can't!"

"What is your problem?"

"Thorns, Jack!"

"Ignore them!"

"I can't."

"You have to!"

"I can't!"

"You're almost there!" I said, trying encouragement.

Then she was close enough. John reached down and grabbed her hand, helping and hauling her up over the edge. Suddenly, it seemed, she was gone.

One duck left.

I found out what Erica had been talking about. At the top, where she had been stuck, everything was thorns. Every species of long-spiked, thorny plant in the wild kingdom had offspring in the last eight feet of that wash. It was like some kind of powerful thorn magnet. Thorns grabbed my shirt, tore at my pants, and stabbed through my shoes into my feet. They were impossible to ignore.

The gunshot, however, focused my mind. For an instant, I wondered how these guys could be poachers with such terrible aim. They needed automatic weapons or rocket-propelled grenades or something. Maybe land mines. Somehow, they missed me again.

The bullet ripped through the mass of thorns on my right, knocking loose a huge chunk of bushes and soil and rocks. As the avalanching mass slid past me, I noticed that it left a bunch of clean handholds in its wake.

But as I reached for a clean, unthorny grip, the sliding tangle of bushes snagged my pant leg. It pulled me off balance. I teetered back on one foot, thorns firmly in my left hand, nothing at all in my right. For a split second I looked down. Below me lay a rocky fall and a watery grave.

"Jack!" It was John, leaning way over the edge, stretching out his hand to help me. "Here!"

That was the odd thing. After the drawing of Erica, after the looks, even after the full confession, he was *helping* me. More than that, he was putting himself in the line of fire for me. Dangling there, almost falling off the face of the bluff, a thought flashed through my head. Back in Gridlock, Macy had told me that John had caught his wife cheating on him, *and he had walked away*.

I heard and felt the tearing as the bushes ripped away from my pants. My hand shot up and locked onto John's. He hauled and I

scrambled and just as I cleared the rim, another bullet cracked through the air over our heads.

Erica and I lay panting on the sand. John knelt near the edge, peeking through a clump of bushes.

Several seconds passed. Finally I could talk again. "Thanks, John," I said.

John said nothing, intently watching the poachers.

"You're a jerk, Jack," Erica said.

I had noticed how sexy her voice was, so I said nothing.

A few moments later, we heard the truck moving again.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

John waited before answering. "They're going back toward our truck," he said finally.

"What for?" I asked.

John shrugged. "I hope I don't know."

"Maybe they're going to roast hot dogs," Erica said, aiming the sarcasm at me.

I ignored her.

John stood up and walked away from the rim, surveying the area. Erica and I joined him.

Bluff and river to our west. Northwest, the column of black smoke from Macy's truck rising and dispersing into the air. To the north and east, the rough hill I'd admired the day before, and beyond it purple mountains that under other circumstances would have been beautiful. To the east, a rugged series of hills and mountains, with the sun still warming up the morning. To the south—

"A million miles to Phoenix," Erica said, reading my mind again.

"Actually," John said, "it's only a little over forty."

We thought about that. Hills and mountains stretched away as far as we could see to the south. Sheep Bridge was a long way away. Horseshoe Lake was a long way past that, and civilization still farther. We now had no truck, no guns, and no Macy and Sharon. Far to the south, the

### T. F. Torrey

mountains rose hazy and jagged in the distance. And Phoenix was a long way past them.

"Only..." I repeated.

"Seems like a million," Erica said.

When we'd left the previous day, it hadn't occurred to me that I might never return.

Suddenly I noticed that the desert was absolutely quiet. Deathly quiet.

## Chapter Nineteen: The Best Offense

"Let's just take it one step at a time," John said.

That seemed like a good idea to me. "The first thing we have to do is find Macy and Sharon," I suggested.

"No," John corrected. "The first thing we have to do is get to a secure place."

"In case the poachers come after us," Erica said.

"Oh," I said. I glanced sheepishly at John, then I looked again. He was wearing his hat. Somehow, while he was rescuing Erica, he'd managed to rescue his hat, too. Was there no end to this guy? "Where's a 'secure place'?" I asked.

"Someplace where we can see them and they can't see us," John explained. "Someplace where they can't sneak up on us. Someplace we can defend somehow."

"Great," I said. "Where?"

He nodded his head to the north. "Up on that hill."

We went.

Up on the bluff, the vegetation was much more scarce than it had been by the river. I found myself wondering if water had something to do with plant growth. Then I realized I was stupid.

Like everything else, the hill was a maze of mounds and gullies and washes. It got kind of steep toward the top, but the vegetation was thin, and we made it easily. John led us around and up the east side of the hill, so we wouldn't be walking ducks in the poachers' sights. The smoke from Macy's truck rose silently from behind the hilltop.

Near the peak we found a little depression. "This is perfect," John said when he saw it. "From here we can see them coming fifty yards in any direction, and we can throw rocks at them if they come up."

"Throw rocks?" I asked. "That's not much compared to bullets."

"We're kind of low on choices," John said.

"Jesus, Jack," Erica said.

I sighed. "So I guess the next thing we do is get some rocks," I suggested.

John shook his head. "Next thing is you two have to get those wounds cleaned up a bit. I'll go and see what they're doing."

I was amazed. He'd climbed through the same thorns we had—unaided—and he hadn't gotten cut up. As he walked the last few feet to the hilltop, I shook my head in disbelief.

"What's wrong, Jack?" Erica asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Let me see that cut on your leg."

She pulled her pant leg up. The jagged cut, about two inches long and just above her ankle, was still bleeding. Around it, a nice bruise darkened. The wound was clean, either from the river or from her pant leg or both.

"Wow," I said. "Do you think you'll need stitches?"

"No," she said immediately.

I looked at the cut again. "I don't know," I said.

"Jack, I'm a nurse, remember? I don't need stitches."

"Of course," I said. Of course she was a nurse. Of course she knew.

"What I need is something clean to stop the bleeding. Do you have a handkerchief?"

I shook my head. "Must have left it in my suit coat."

"Don't get sarcastic, Jack," she said. "I need something to stop the bleeding. Give me your shirt."

"Are you kidding?"

"No, Jack. I need it to tie against the cut."

"No way," I said. "I'd be sunburned to a crisp before noon."

"Jack, don't be a baby," she shot back.

"Use your own shirt. It's your cut."

"Jesus, you two," John interrupted. He turned and walked back to us. "We need to work together if we want to survive out here. This bickering doesn't help a bit. They're working together like a good team, and we need to do the same if we're going to survive." He stuck his hand in a pocket of his fishing vest and produced a folded handkerchief. I just blinked. "It's a little wet," he said, "but it's clean." He handed it to her.

Erica thanked him and began bandaging her wound.

"I don't suppose you have some tweezers in there," I said.

"Sorry," he said. While he resumed his post, I set to work on some of the thorns that had found a new home in my hands. There were lots of them. My fingernails were cut short, and I couldn't get a grip on most of them.

Erica finished tying the bandage to her leg and went to work on the thorns in her own hands. She couldn't have had many; she'd had my head and shoulders to climb on.

"John," Erica said as she worked, "who are those guys?"

"The truck is the same as the one that rammed us on the road yesterday," John said. "I imagine the two guys shooting at us today are the same ones that were in it then."

"Do you think they're doing all this just because of Macy's bumper sticker?"

John thought for a moment. "I don't know," he admitted, "but that seems pretty unlikely."

"What else could it be?" she asked.

He had no answer.

"Maybe they're not poachers at all," I said, getting an idea. "Maybe they have a moonshine still out here and they think we found it." "Moonshine?" John asked mockingly. "This isn't Tennessee."

"No, not moonshine," Erica said. "Drugs. Maybe we're close to a drug lab."

"Then why the searchlight on the truck?" John asked.

I didn't know. We thought.

"Maybe they have a drug lab and they're trying to disguise themselves as poachers," I suggested.

John looked back at me quickly, silently. "That would be like a bank robber carrying a bloody knife so people would think he was just a murderer," he said.

Stupid idea.

John turned his gaze back to Macy's burning truck and our attackers by the river below.

"Maybe it's not a lab," Erica said suddenly. "Maybe they have planes flying up from Mexico and dropping the drugs near here at night."

"And they use the searchlight to find them," I finished.

John stared down across the river for a moment. Erica and I exchanged proud, triumphant glances. "Then what are the coolers in the back of their truck for?" he asked.

"I didn't see any coolers in their truck," Erica pointed out.

"I can see them from here," John said.

"Oh," she said. "Where are they, anyway?"

"They're parked by Macy's truck, looking around."

"Maybe the coolers are for their own food and water while they're out here," I said.

"They wouldn't need eight coolers for a couple days in the desert, Jack," John said. "They must be for taking deer back to town."

"Can't be," I said. "How would they fit a whole deer in a cooler?"

"They clean them out and cut them into quarters first, Jack," John said. "Then they fit very nicely into coolers." I wasn't convinced. "Maybe they're making something in a lab, something they have to keep cold. Like LSD."

John shook his head. "I don't think you have to keep LSD cold, and what would the searchlight be for?"

I didn't know.

Neither did Erica. "Maybe they have a lab *and* they smuggle drugs up from Mexico," she said without conviction.

"I think," John said thoughtfully, "that they're just poachers. Shotguns would be better for protecting a lab. If they had shotguns instead of rifles, they'd probably have gotten us by now."

We thought about that for a while. Erica, with her feminine fingernails, had already finished pulling the thorns from her hands. I still struggled. My left hand bled a little from when I was hanging onto the thorns to save my life. Erica watched me wrestle with the thorns a bit longer, sighed, then said she'd get them. John continued his vigilance.

With Erica pulling the thorns out of my hands, a thought came to mind. Surprisingly, it wasn't a thought about Erica.

"John," I said, "where are Macy and Sharon?"

John was silent.

"John?" Erica said, her face paling. "Are they in the truck?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't *think* so?" I asked.

"I don't see them," he said, turning back to us. "I don't see them in the truck. I don't see them on the ground or by the river. I don't see them anywhere."

"You don't think that—" Erica didn't finish.

"No, I don't," John said. "I think they got away. Maybe the poachers don't even know they're around."

"They saw all of us in the truck yesterday," I said.

"If they are somewhere else," Erica said, "how are we going to find them?"

#### T. F. Torrey

"We'll find them," John said. "Macy won't leave without us, and we'd probably be able to see them from here, anyway."

"I hope we find them before the poachers do," I put in.

"I hope Macy has his revolver with him," John said.

Of course!

"Maybe he has his rifle," I said, getting excited. "He had it with him yesterday. Shooting off his frustrations." Erica was hopeful now, too.

John shook his head. "It kept misfiring yesterday. He threw it back into the truck when he went off to talk to you. I'm sure he didn't take it today."

"Oh," I said.

"I just hope he didn't leave his revolver in the truck like I left mine," he continued. "These poachers would lay off if we were shooting back."

We let that sink in. Erica finished pulling the thorns from my hand, and I wiped the blood off on my shirt. "So what do we do now?" I asked.

John had sat down on the hilltop where he could watch the poachers. "Well," he said. "We get some rocks to use in self-defense if we have to, and we wait."

"Wait for what?" Erica asked.

"Wait to see what the poachers are going to do. If they come after us, we run, if we can. If they don't, we find Macy and Sharon."

"Then what?"

"Let's take this one step at a time," John said again. "We'll think of something."

I had confidence in that man.

The fire of Macy's truck died down while Erica and I gathered fistsized rocks, and John reported that the poachers were sifting through the rubble. They took some things, but we couldn't see what.

While we waited and watched, the sun climbed all the way to noon.

Then, as abruptly as they had entered, they left. They drove slowly, kicking up no dust trail. We saw them drive up the crude road Macy had

driven in on. After they had gone maybe a quarter of a mile, we lost sight of them in the thick vegetation.

"Where are they going?" Erica wanted to know.

John said he didn't know.

"They could be going back to town," I suggested. "They might have left us here to die in the desert."

"Could be," John agreed.

"They might be trying to trick us," Erica suggested.

"Into what?" I asked.

"Into going back to the truck, so they can come back and shoot us."

We thought about that.

"They might be looking for a place to cross somewhere downriver," John said, "so that they can come after us."

"So they could be doing *anything*," I said. "The real question is, what are *we* going to do?" Erica and I both looked expectantly at John. He was the proven master.

"Let's watch and wait a little longer."

We did. Hiding from the sun in the shadows of saguaro cacti, we watched nothing happen and waited for almost two hours. The only things moving were the shadows, the sun, and the river; the shadows creeping to the east, the sun dragging to the west, and the river bubbling happily toward the Gulf of California.

Finally John made his decision. "Okay," he said, turning to face Erica and me. "Here's the plan. The first thing we have to do is survive, right?"

"Survive what?" I asked. "They're gone, aren't they?"

"The desert is still here," John said flatly. "It's not going anywhere. It's still forty miles to Phoenix."

"Yeah," I said stupidly.

"The first thing," John said, "is you and I are going down to the truck to get anything we can use."

"I want to go," Erica said.

"I need you right here," John said. "You have to watch to see if they come after us. If they start to come back, don't shout to us. Throw some rocks down near us and we'll clear out."

"What if they come after me?" she asked.

"Watch for them," John said. "If they come this way, on this side of the river, throw some rocks down and run upriver. I'll meet you up there."

She looked hurt.

"I don't think they're coming back," John said.

"I still want to go," she insisted.

John smiled gently. "Erica, you can't swim."

"Wait," I said. "I don't like that plan."

John was taken aback. "Why not?"

"If they come after her while we're gone," I said, "she's a goner. With that limp they'll catch her for sure."

"So what do you think?" John asked. "You want to go alone?"

I shook my head. "I wouldn't know useful from useless. I'll stay here with her. You go to the truck. If they come this way, I'll signal you and have her go the other way after you and I'll fight them off with rocks until you get here."

They both looked at me, surprised.

"Okay, Jack," John agreed. "Let's do that."

I was amazed. Maybe I could be useful after all.

John kissed Erica "for luck" and went off down the hill, heading upriver. After about a hundred yards, he found another wash on the face of the bluff and began descending.

Suddenly Erica turned to me, smiling disbelievingly. "You would really stay here and defend me while I got away?" she asked.

I nodded. "No," I said. "They have guns. Big guns. If they come after us, I'm running away with you."

Her smile vanished. "You," she said, "really are a jerk."

I let it go.

It didn't take John long to get across the river and to the burned-out hulk of the truck. He spent only a few minutes more pawing through the ashes. Soon he was crossing the river again, coming back.

We watched, but we didn't see anyone coming. No Macy or Sharon. No poachers.

But I did notice something strange and familiar. Something that brought reality a bit more clearly into focus. I was hungry. And thirsty. The food in the coolers in the truck was surely burned and ruined. We didn't have any water but the river, eighty feet below my perch and unsanitary besides. No food till Phoenix. No fun.

I didn't tell Erica what was on my mind. Some things it's better not to share.

Then John was back. Empty-handed.

"Any food?" I asked.

He shook his head. "They kicked it into the river."

"Anything?" Erica asked plaintively.

"Just this," John said ruefully, reaching into his vest pocket.

"A gun?" I asked hopefully.

No. It was only a canteen. A grubby old aluminum one-quart canteen, dented by the years and scorched by the fire. "There's fresh water in it," John said.

At least that was good. Erica unscrewed the top and we sipped some of the water.

"What do we do now?" Erica asked, wiping her lips with the back of her hand.

John sighed. "Now we wait again."

"For what?" I asked.

"For Macy and Sharon," John explained. "They weren't around the truck, but they'll probably go back to it like I did. If they go anywhere around here or there we'll be able to see them from here."

"What if they don't turn up?" I asked.

"They will. They won't go anywhere without us."

"What if they're waiting for us to find them?"

John shook his head. "Macy can't sit still that long."

He was right.

"What if the poachers come back first?" Erica asked.

"I almost hope they do," John said.

"Why?"

"Because we'll see them before they see us," he said, "and we can trick them and take their truck."

"How?"

He shrugged. "I'll think of something."

"John," Erica began. "I'm hungry. What are we going to do for food?"

"I'll get some later," he said.

"Where?" I asked.

He just smiled. "Don't worry about that," he said. "Let's just keep our eyes peeled for Macy and Sharon."

"Or the poachers," Erica added.

So we did.

All day long. We could see the hillside for fifty yards all around, and for miles in most directions beyond it, and by the end of the day we had everything memorized.

As the sun slowly plodded toward the western mountains, we kept carefully vigilant. We hid from the sun in the shadows as best we could. We tried not to think about the heat. It was damn hot. We tried not to think about food. I was damn hungry.

I thought about how far it was to Phoenix. I thought about how John might get food. I thought about how much I loved air conditioning. And I thought a lot about Macy's revolver.

I thought entirely too much about Erica. Even after sleeping last night and running and swimming and climbing today, she still looked gorgeous. A gentle breeze dried her hair and blew it across her face, her chest. The brilliant sunlight revealed perfection in her clear blue eyes. Her hands had been softer than silk when she'd taken the thorns out of my hand. Her feisty personality only added to her magnetism. As long as I was stuck in the desert, I was happy to be stuck with her.

I wondered if the poachers had gone back to Phoenix, or the chemists back to their lab, or the smugglers back to their drop zone, or whatever.

We saw nothing. We thought of nothing ingenious. We watched the shadows crawl across the sand.

At last the sun began to disappear behind the western mountains. The three of us sat side-by-side on the west flank of the hill, overlooking the rim of the bluff, the truck wreck, and the sunset panorama, which somehow wasn't as pretty as the previous night's. Off on the southwestern horizon, dark clouds ominously crept our way.

John stood up and stretched. "Looks like it's time for some food," he said.

"What about Macy and Sharon?" Erica asked.

"No, I thought we'd have some fish," he said.

"I meant, where are they?"

John shook his head and smiled soothingly. "They'll be along," he said. "In the meantime, I'm starved."

"How are we going to catch fish without any fishing rods?" I asked.

John smiled like a wizard. "I'll show you, Jack," he said. "Come on."

Erica and I followed him down from the hilltop toward the river.

Suddenly he stopped, looking off in the distance. Erica and I followed his gaze.

"Wow," he said solemnly.

"Wow, what?" I asked.

He nodded toward the clouds. Sweeping in toward us, the clouds had grown darker and rougher, looking more like rain every minute. "They're coming in quick."

"Yeah," I said. "It's a monsoon storm, all right."

"Hope we don't get dumped on," he said.

"Or struck by lightning," Erica added.

"We'd better get—" John stopped suddenly and whirled around, facing the hilltop. Erica and I ducked reflexively and spun around.

Then we all heard it: the clattering of rocks. The noise people make when they're walking up the other side of the hill you're on.

"Shit!" I hissed. "The poachers!"

"What are we going to do?" Erica whispered urgently. "We don't have any place to run to."

We looked around quickly. She was right. We stood twenty feet from the bluff. Up- and downriver they could shoot at us all day from the hilltop. Over the rim was a forty-foot plunge to water that might not be very deep.

We were screwed.

"We've got no choice!" John hissed. He stooped and picked up a rock in each hand. "Come on, Jack!"

He crept quickly back up the hill.

I picked up a couple of rocks and followed him. I thought we were stupid taking rocks to a gunfight. My heart pounded in my throat. My eyes were fixed firmly on the hilltop. Any second they'd be there—

Down I went. I hadn't been watching the ground, and I'd stepped in a hole big enough to knock me down. I fell all out of control, unable to catch myself. My body thudding on the ground jolted the rocks out of my hand, and they clattered noisily down the hill.

I looked sheepishly up at John. He stopped where he was, crouching and cocking his arm back.

We heard the other footsteps stop just over the hilltop from us.

Then the voice came over the hilltop to us, piercing and powerful like an eagle's scream.

# Chapter Twenty: Monday Night

"John? Jack?"

"Gus!"

"Glatts!"

It was Macy. Thank God it was fucking Macy.

John stood up and I got to my feet as Macy and Sharon walked over the hilltop to us.

"Did we scare you?" Macy asked, beaming.

"Nah," John said. "Everything was under control."

Except me. Now, for the first time, after all that had happened that day, I was shaking. Maybe it was because I was hungry, or because this time we had nowhere left to run. Or maybe I had finally realized exactly how close to the end of our rope we really were, and that scared the hell out of me.

Sharon rushed forward and hugged Erica. They went through the usual I-was-so-scared-for-you's.

John put down his stones.

"Gus?" Macy asked me. "You haven't called me that since we were teenagers, Jack."

I smiled, still shaking. "Heat of the moment," I said. Turning to John, I asked, "What the hell is 'glatts', anyway?"

John smiled. "It's the foulest word I know," he said. "My ex-wife's maiden name."

Everybody laughed

We swapped horror stories. Erica and John and I told them about the poachers attacking us and chasing us and us chasing them and us running across the river and hiding here all day and John sneaking back to the truck. Macy and Sharon told us they'd been fishing upriver when they heard the first shots, that they'd been headed back when their truck had exploded, that they'd heard more shots and guessed we were in trouble, that they'd seen us climb up the wash, and that after we were safe they'd gone upriver to find a place to cross. They had walked a long way upriver so that Sharon wouldn't have to climb the bluff, because she was pregnant. Also because she was pregnant they had rested through the hottest part of the day. Then they had come back to the hilltop to find us.

"How did you know we'd be here?" John asked.

Macy beamed. "It's the highest place around. The easiest to defend. Just like you always say."

"Of course," John said, smiling.

I thought Macy was a great apprentice.

Then we swapped ideas about what our attackers might be up to. Smuggling. Synthesizing drugs. Moonshine. John still insisted that they were poachers.

Finally John got around to asking the big question, the one we'd all been waiting for. "Macy," he began hopefully, "you have your gun, right?"

Macy looked at the ground. We all could have stayed in heartbreak hotel. "I left it in the truck," he said.

I turned and walked a couple steps away. All day I'd been hoping he'd kept his gun. Nope.

All day.

"Maybe," Macy said, growing suddenly excited. "Maybe it's still there, still in the truck. Fire won't hurt it, right?"

John said nothing. I said nothing.

"John looked through the truck already," Erica explained quietly. "They took the guns." Everyone was quiet for several moments.

"Hey!" Sharon piped up suddenly. "We better call the police!"

The silence continued. I had to fight off the urge to be viciously sarcastic.

"We'll do that," John said reassuringly, "just as soon as we get back to Phoenix. Right now I'm a bit hungry. I think I'll go catch me some fish."

The heat must have gotten to Sharon.

John walked down the hill to the edge of the bluff. We followed him. The conflicting feelings of relief and frustration were overwhelming. We'd been hoping all day that Macy and Sharon were all right. Now they were here, and they were all right. But they didn't have the damn gun, and it was still a million miles to Phoenix.

The five of us stood at the edge of the bluff, watching the river and the waning sunset, as silent as our shadows on the hill behind us.

"How," I asked John, "are you going to get fish with no fishing poles?" We all turned to him expectantly.

He flashed the wizard's smile again. He took off his outback hat and turned it over. With his fingers he folded back the inside rim band. Under the band were several coils of fishing line, four barbed hooks, maybe a dozen paraffin-tipped safety matches, and a single-edged razor blade. "I like to be prepared," he said.

"I'm glad you do," I said, smiling wide.

"Hey!" Macy said. "That's not high-test line. If you catch a really big one, it'll snap that line like nothing."

"We'll just catch little ones," John said. "But we better hurry," he added, looking off at the approaching clouds, which were now blotting out the last light of the sunset. "It's going to be cold and stormy here soon."

He was right.

In front of us, a wash cut down the face of the bluff to the river. John and Macy made their way down the wash to catch some fish. Erica's

#### T. F. Torrey

ankle was feeling much better, and she tagged along with them. I stayed on the rim to keep an eye out for the poachers. Sharon stayed with me because she didn't want to climb down the wash being pregnant.

"Great," she said sarcastically after they'd gone. "It's going to be stormy."

"It's pretty warm," I said. "A little rain might be...refreshing."

"No, it won't," she said dejectedly, sitting down on the rocks. "The storm will make it cold. First the wind will blow dirt everywhere, so we'll be cold and covered in dirt. Then the rain will hit us, and we'll be cold and covered in mud."

Sadly, she too was probably right.

"It could be worse," I said.

"How? How could it be worse?"

We could have two of you, I thought. I said, "We could be here without John."

"If it wasn't for John, we wouldn't be here at all. Until he met John, Macy never even liked the desert. He didn't even know it existed."

I let it go.

For the next hour or so we waited in silence, only occasionally interrupted by more complaints from Sharon. I wondered if her kid would grow up to be a whiner like her. The night finished falling. Even in the dark it was still warm. The gentle breeze had gone away. Now the air was calm, only broken by gusts of wind like sharp breaths drawn in anticipation of the coming storm. The fishermen fished silently, and I was just beginning to become concerned about them when I heard them climbing back up the wash.

John came up first, followed quickly by Erica and Macy, and we five were together again. "Chow time," John said.

"Where's the fish?" Sharon asked.

Macy opened his shirt, revealing the fish. They'd cleaned and cut them down by the river, so actually what he had in his shirt was a stack of fillets. "Great," Sharon said. "Let's get the fire going. I'm starved."

"Whoa," John said. "We aren't building any fire."

"Why not?" she asked. "You have matches in your hat. I saw them."

"We're not building any fire," he repeated. "Those poachers would see it for sure, and I've had enough of being a target for one day."

"You mean we have to eat this fish raw?"

"Don't think 'fish'," John said. "Think 'sushi'. It's more expensive."

"No, this is stupid," Sharon said. She looked around desperately. "Why can't we build a fire on the other side of the hill? Where they can't see it?"

"Because," John explained patiently, "we don't know where they are."

"If we build a fire we might be able to see them in the light."

"Not before they see us," he returned. "Look, if we had our guns it would be different, Sharon, but we don't."

"So we have to eat raw fish," she said dejectedly.

Nobody else seemed to mind too much. We walked back up to our defensible hilltop position and ate like javelinas. I pretended I was in an expensive restaurant and I'd ordered sushi. It didn't work. I wanted to send it back and have it cooked. And I wanted tartar sauce. And some wine.

"How come they get a fire and we don't?" whined Sharon.

That wasn't the kind of wine I'd been thinking about.

She was sitting on the hilltop where John had watched the poachers from earlier. The rest of us sat in the little depression, depressed. We'd mostly finished the fish.

"They probably *don't* have a fire," John said without looking up.

"Then what do they have?" she asked.

"Probably nothing, for the same reason we don't," John said, adding, "if they're out here at all."

"Well," she said, "somebody has a fire."

"How do you know?"

"Because," she said, "I can see it from here."

We all scrambled to the hilltop, following her gaze off to the west.

There, in the area where we'd lost sight of the poachers' truck earlier, a little fire flickered. The light was too distant and too little to make out any details of the area around it, but it was definitely a fire.

"Wow," John said.

"Do you think it's the poachers?" Macy asked.

"I don't think they would build a fire," John said. "They wouldn't want us to know where they are."

"So who could it be?" Erica asked.

"Maybe it's some other hunters or fishers or campers or something," Macy suggested.

"Maybe," John agreed, "but it's Monday night, and there's usually no one up here during the week."

"But if the poachers wouldn't build a fire then it *has* to be somebody else, right?" Erica asked.

"Somebody else might help us," Macy suggested hopefully.

"They can give us some real food!" Sharon said.

"Maybe they have a gun," I said.

"They can give us a ride back to Phoenix," John said soberly, adding, "*if* it's somebody else and not the poachers."

"What do you mean?" Sharon demanded. "You just said the poachers wouldn't build a fire."

"I also said that nobody else would be out here," John said.

We were all quiet for a while.

"Well," Sharon said, "if it's someone else, we can't just let them go."

"And if it's the poachers," John said, "we can't just go up to them and ask them for a ride."

"So what do we do?" Erica asked.

John thought for only a moment. "Here's the plan," he said. "Macy and I will go down to see who is at the fire. Jack, you stay here with the girls. You should be safe here. If the fire belongs to someone else, we'll come back for you and get out of here tonight."

"What if it *is* the poachers?" I asked.

"I'll think of something," he said.

I knew what he had in mind. He would add them to the scoreboard that included the dog, the thugs, and the rattlesnake. John Lupo: two. Poachers: zero.

"When are you going to go?" Erica asked.

John looked up at the sky, then off at the fire. He sighed. "Right now. They just lit the fire, so they'll probably be around for a while. They might leave if it starts raining." He paused. "We have to go now."

So that was that. Sharon wanted to go, but of course Macy wouldn't let her. Erica wanted to go too, but of course John insisted that she stay on account of her ankle. Macy put his shirt back on and John adjusted his hat.

"So, uh, we'll just wait for you here, then, right?" I asked.

"Yeah," John said. "You'll be okay?"

"Yeah."

Erica had to give John a kiss "for luck", so of course then Sharon had to give Macy one. As Macy and John made their way upriver to cross at the wash where John had earlier, I had to turn away. The idea had suddenly occurred to me to ask Erica for a "kiss for luck". I had to bite my lip, lest I be tempted.

Sharon distracted me. "Great," she said sarcastically, "if the poachers come here while John and Macy are gone, *Jack* is all we have for protection. We might as well just surrender to them right now."

"You can't," I pointed out. "We don't know where they are."

"You make me sick, Jack," she said. "I'm going down by the bluff to watch them."

"Wait," I said. "You should stay here. We can see the fire from here, and you can't see anything else, anyway." She started walking on down the hill, ignoring me. "Sharon," I said, "we really should stick together here."

"Quit your whining, Jack," she said back over her shoulder. She carefully made her way down the hill.

"Great," I muttered to myself and Erica. I sat down on the rocks to watch the fire and Sharon. Erica sat down beside me, acting strangely.

"Jack," she said quietly. "I'm really worried."

So was I. The wind had abated. I could feel her heat. I could smell her body. This had to stop before I did something stupid. It wasn't right to feel this way. Still...I'd just sit here and enjoy it a little longer.

"We'll be safe here," I said.

"I don't mean that," she said. She sighed and looked around cautiously. "I just feel like—like our luck's about to run out, that's all."

"What luck?" I asked. "During the course of today we've been shot at, chased, our truck was blown up, we lost all our food and our guns, and we've been stranded way out in the middle of the desert." I laughed a little. "That's *bad* luck to me. And I *hope* that runs out."

She wasn't convinced. "We were lucky, Jack. They must have shot at us twenty times—"

"Seemed more like a hundred."

"-but they didn't hit us once."

"Got you in the ankle."

"Not with a bullet, though." She paused and looked into the darkness for words. "Jack, I just can't help feeling like we're really close to getting shot. I mean, what if the people at the fire *are* the poachers?"

"Relax," I said. "John says the poachers probably left us for dead."

"What if they didn't, Jack? Then Macy and John are just traipsing up to them unarmed."

"Well, if it is them, John can take care of himself. He'll see them or their truck before the poachers even know he's there."

She was quiet for a moment. "Jack," she said thoughtfully, "if it is someone else, why didn't we hear them drive in there?"

"Maybe...uh...maybe they drove in really slowly, like the poachers did when they were leaving."

"Maybe," she said, still not convinced.

We watched the fire and waited. Below us, Sharon sat down on the rim of the bluff, also watching the fire. I figured it would take John and Macy at least a half hour to reach the fire, moving that far with stealth and without light. The previous night, the desert creatures had come alive as the sun died. Tonight they were quiet, ominously calm before the storm.

After a few moments Erica spoke up again, perhaps to take her mind off our predicament.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Jack?" she asked.

"No," I admitted quietly, like I was a criminal for it, or a leper.

"Why not?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I guess I just have particular tastes."

She laughed. "So you just pick up drunk girls at bars for sport?"

I smiled. Despite our past intimacy, we still didn't even begin to know each other. "I don't pick up drunk girls," I said.

"You picked me up."

"Well, you were the first," I said. "And the last. After I met you I stopped driving my car to work so I'd stay out of that kind of trouble."

She was surprised. "I don't believe you."

"It's the truth. If a girl gets too drunk now, I *have* to call her a taxi. I walk to work."

"Really?"

I raised my eyebrows and nodded. "It's not much of a car anyway, kind of a hand-me-down junker that used to belong to my uncle, but it's the thought that counts, right?"

She laughed again. It was nice hearing her laugh.

I smiled and looked into her eyes. "You were the first, and the last."

She sat there with her mouth open for a second. "Why me?"

"Well..." I had to think. I really thought I shouldn't be talking about it. "Well," I began again, "I thought you were special."

"Why? Because my boyfriend dumped me?"

"No, because of the way you took it. Like it was the end of a dream or something." I paused for a second. "Most people don't fall that far in love."

"Does that turn you on?" she asked. "Women in love with someone else?"

"No," I said, "but I see lots of couples only attached to each other by a thread, flirting around and getting phone numbers and stuff like that whenever the other one goes to the bathroom." I shook my head. "When I get involved with someone, I like her to be as attached as I am."

"And you get strongly attached?"

"Like superglue."

"So why aren't you still stuck to your last girlfriend? Why aren't you married, Mr. Superglue?"

I shrugged. Diane, actually, had been my last real girlfriend. "I still haven't found Miss Right."

She laughed again. "Still looking for Miss Right. Still finding Miss Right Now."

I laughed with her, a gentle, easy laugh.

"So what's Miss Right like?" she asked.

I said I didn't know.

"So how will you know when you find her?"

"I don't know," I said again. "She'll be special, irresistible."

"And you'll run away together and get married."

"Definitely."

"Sounds very romantic," she said.

"Hmm..." I said. "Sounds pretty far-fetched to me."

Lightning flashed a jagged web off in the western distance. In its light, I saw the face of the beautiful, blonde-haired girl sitting beside me.

After the flash I could still see her, looking the way she had months ago in her apartment. I could almost feel the teeth hard and soft in my shoulder.

"Four...five..." She counted the seconds slowly. "Six...seven... eight... nine—" The thunder rumbled menacingly overhead. "That's just under two miles away."

I looked around us. "Hey," I said, "isn't it kind of dumb for us to be sitting on this hilltop with the storm coming?"

"More than *kind of* dumb," she said.

"Let's go down by Sharon," I said.

She didn't disagree.

As we made our way down the slope, lightning flashed several more times. Each time, Erica counted the seconds till the thunder struck. The closest it got was one bolt that was seven and a half seconds close, or a mile and a half away. The wind picked up, blowing from the southwest. The lightning was west and northwest of us. With a little good luck, the storm would blow past us and not over us.

The lightning flashes lit up the desert around us like a scene in a black and white movie. In the brief pulses of light, I looked for any sign of Macy or John around the fire. I saw nothing but bushes and saguaro, no sign of anyone, just the fire flickering low in the gusts of wind.

Erica and I sat down beside Sharon to watch the display.

"That wind sure is cold," Sharon said as we sat down.

"Yeah," I agreed.

While we waited and watched, the lightning grew more intense, but I was relieved to notice that it didn't get closer. Maybe the rain would miss us, too. Sharon managed to complain about every single element of the desert, our predicament, being pregnant, Macy and John, and life in general. Erica and I did not encourage her. I told myself that she was just anxious and worried. Erica looked like she might rather take her chances on the hilltop.

So we were much relieved when we heard John and Macy's footsteps on the hillside behind us. "Cool," I said, standing up. "With the thunder and all I didn't hear—"

Lightning flashed.

It wasn't Macy and John at all. It was the poachers. They were only about twenty feet from us, and the thunder hadn't distracted them at all. They held their rifles at their hips, leveled right at us. And they were smiling.

"Hi," one of them said, "you guys havin' a party?"

### Chapter Twenty-one: Turnabout

"Well," I said. "We've been wondering where you were."

"Well," the first one said, "you seem to have found us."

"I think you should know," Sharon piped up, "that I'm pregnant, so if you shoot me you'll really be killing a defenseless baby."

"Thanks," the other one said, "I'll remember to write that on my scorecard."

They laughed. Just then thunder clapped. My heart leapt into my throat, thinking at first that they'd fired their rifles.

They hadn't.

I tried desperately to think of a way out. There was none. They stood between us and the hilltop. We stood with our backs to the bluff. To our left and right they could shoot at us forever, but they wouldn't have to. The only way out was over the bluff. Only the water might be shallow, or we might land on the rocks.

Screwed again.

"Where's your little friends?" the first one asked.

Before I could say anything Sharon spoke up. "They went to get the police," she said. "You're really going to be in trouble when they get back."

They laughed again. "They went to get the police, huh?" the first one said. "Shit, they should be back sometime tomorrow, then."

They took a couple steps toward us. Lightning flashed behind us, glinting menacingly off their barrels. In the blink of light I could see them, two giants wearing dark clothes and boots and hats.

"Look," I said desperately, "you don't want to do this."

"We don't?"

"No. If you just let us go, we'll go on our way, and we'll say we never saw anything."

"You will?"

Thunder struck again, and my heart jumped again.

"Yeah," Erica said. "We'll just go home and never say anything about it to anybody."

They took another couple steps toward us. All three of us instinctively took a half-step backward.

"Well," the first poacher said, "that sounds nice and all, but I don't think so."

"Honest," Erica pleaded, "we'll swear we never saw a thing."

"You know," the second poacher said to the first. "She sure has got some beautiful lips."

The cold blood running through my veins chilled to ice. The first poacher smiled. They stepped forward. We stepped back.

The gunshot boomed louder than thunder.

We all jumped. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Erica start to fall over the edge of the bluff. I turned toward her and lunged as she fell, eyes wide, arms stretched out to grab something—anything.

And I caught her, snagged her right hand with both of mine.

As she disappeared over the edge and I fell to the ground, holding her hand with all my strength, I realized something.

The poachers hadn't fired the shot.

They did now, but I knew they weren't shooting at us. They were shooting *back*—at John and Macy. The cavalry to the rescue.

#### The Desert King

I had other things on my mind. Erica's palm was sweaty, my palms were sweaty.

Her hand was slipping.

Sharon had ducked to the ground when the first shot exploded. I called to her to grab Erica's other hand. She looked at me like she didn't know who I was, paralyzed with fear. I didn't dare try to pull Erica up because I thought I'd lose my grip. I just held on.

Lightning flashed.

Another gunshot cracked behind us. The bullet ricocheted off the rocks and whined over my head toward the fire.

I heard their footsteps as the poachers ran for cover.

Three more gunshots pounded in rapid succession, two from the poachers and one back at them.

Apparently they felt they were losing, or maybe they wanted to wait for a better chance at us, or maybe they had other people to torment.

Whatever it was, I heard their footsteps as they ran farther away—and kept going.

The thunder struck. This time my heart knew the difference.

Suddenly John was there, reaching over the edge of the bluff. He grabbed Erica's other hand, and we hauled her back onto the rim.

There was no time for thanks.

"Come on," John said urgently. "We have to get out of here."

We got.

John trotted ahead of us. Macy brought up the rear. John led us upriver. We went on for what seemed like quite a ways. I was wondering if he planned on crossing the river again when he took a right turn and headed east, away from the river. This confused me, but not for long. He turned right again quickly and led us back to the hill. He stopped in a different depression partway up the north side, where we could see the fire, but not so high as to make us lightning rods.

John stood. The rest of us collapsed, mostly exhausted and panting, onto the ground.

"That," I said, "was a close one."

"Yeah," Sharon said. "It took you guys long enough to get back."

"We'd have come back sooner," John said, "but we stopped for ice cream."

"I take it that was their fire, then?" I asked.

"Yeah," Macy said. "When we saw they weren't there we figured they were going after you, so we ran all the way back."

"Right," Sharon put in sarcastically. "You probably walked."

"How many guns did you get?" Erica asked.

"Just this one," John said. "Just my baby. It was on the front seat of their truck. We didn't have time to look around."

"Do you think they'll come back soon?" I asked.

"No," John said. "They have to get back to their truck before we do."

"Do you think they'll come back later?"

"I don't know," he said. "I know they don't like being shot at."

We were all quiet for a while. Lightning flashed and I heard Erica slowly counting off the seconds. The lightning was mostly north of us now. It looked like the storm was going to miss us.

"Well," John said finally, "they're back at their truck."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"They just put their fire out. Now that we're armed, they don't want to be targets, either."

"So I guess this means we still can't build a fire, right?" Sharon asked.

"That's right," John said. "That would be like bungee jumping. Only without the bungee cord."

"Great," Sharon said.

The thunder struck, more faintly now than before. "Over three miles," Erica said.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"For now," John said, "I think we should stay here and try to get some rest. They'll never find us here in the dark. If they even bother to look."

"How did they find us before?" Erica asked.

"They probably saw us when we went to get the fish," John said.

"Or they went where they figured we'd be able to defend ourselves," Macy suggested.

"We'll stay here," John said. "We can take turns sleeping, and we can sit close to each other in this depression to cut the wind and keep warm till the morning."

"What will we do in the morning?" I asked.

"Let's just take this one step at a time."

At least we had a gun now.

### Chapter Twenty-two: Green Rubicon

Somewhere that night, unseen except to each other, the poachers drove through the darkness. The desert would have been shiny black outside the windows of their truck. No one knows for sure what they were doing or what they were thinking, but they did not do what they should have done, which would have been to go home.

Instead, as if the Verde River had become their own personal Rubicon, they drove around looking for a fight. Maybe they talked about leaving and decided not to. Maybe they never talked about it, never considered any course of action apart from that before them.

At any rate, they should have left. At this time, they still could have. They could have gone home, and the events of the day would have slipped into stories of the past.

Choosing to stay, creeping through the inky blackness of the desert night, they silently approached the point of no return. Soon, very soon, there could be no turning back. The Desert King

# Part IV: Tuesday

# Chapter Twenty-three: Tuesday Morning

We didn't really take turns sleeping.

The storm churned past us, staying west of us as it moved northward. For a couple more hours we had front-row seats to a spectacular lightning show, but all we got hit with was claps of thunder and slaps of wind.

Macy and John were wet, and they rubbed their arms and legs to keep warm. John had changed into a T-shirt and jeans he must have gotten from the wreckage across the river.

The night became quite chilly. I sat down in the depression, sheltered from the wind. Nestling into a cradle of rocks and sand, I sat back, mostly comfortable, with my arms crossed, hands tucked underneath my arms to keep warm.

To my right, Macy and Sharon sat at the edge of the depression, where Macy could see more of the area around us. They cuddled together for warmth, tucking their hands into various parts of each other's clothes.

Contrasting them, John and Erica sat to my left. John sat on the highest edge of the rim, tirelessly watching over the hillside and the area across the bluff where the poacher's fire had been. Erica sat next to him. John sat with his arms crossed, gun between his chest and arms. Erica sat with her legs bent, knees touching her chin, arms curled around and under her legs with her hands between her thighs. Macy and Sharon looked like a couple of high school sweethearts on an adventure in the big world. John and Erica looked like a couple of platonic friends enjoying each other's intellectual companionship.

When the storm finally began to break up, we all began to doze off in various ways. Sharon went straight to sleep and stayed there. Sometimes I thought I could hear her snoring softly. Macy stayed alertly sitting up as she snuggled asleep against him. Then it was hard to see if his eyes were open or closed. Finally he dissolved with Sharon into a tangle of arms and legs and sleep.

I wished I could sleep, but I couldn't. Somewhere in the night two guys were trying to write our names on their bullets. I dozed sometimes, but every little noise woke me up. Each rustle of wind, every swish of clothing from Macy and Sharon shifting positions flipped my eyelids open wide and sent my heart pounding.

Every time I woke up, Erica was a bit closer to me. It seemed she was slowly rolling downhill in her sleep, right toward me. John, however, remained awake and steady in his perch. Never was I in doubt that his eyes were open, though occasionally I wondered if he was sleeping with them open or if he had hypnotized himself somehow.

The night seemed to drag on forever, but eventually I did manage to doze off for quite a little while.

A distant motor noise snapped my eyes open. At once I was awake, listening intently. Gradually it registered in my brain. It wasn't a motor at all. It was Sharon, snoring again. This time, though, I felt like the night was over. I still felt tired, but dozing had taken the edge off the exhaustion. I felt cold and sticky and hungry and stiff. My mouth was pasty and my eyes crusty. Other than that I was ready and raring for the day.

Some time while I was sleeping, Erica had finished rolling up against me. Now she lay right next to me, curled up with her head next to my leg. The one warm spot on my body was the outside of my left thigh where she breathed against my jeans. The soft, cool spot in my palm was her hand, stretched over her head, tucked under my hand.

Looking around, I saw the first pale streaks of dawn stretching up into the eastern sky, lifting everything to gray. To the west the moon sank into the distant mountains as if running from the light of day. At the edge of the depression, John now stood watching the unfolding morning.

Also, it seemed to me, he'd been watching his girlfriend snuggling closer to me. He'd probably seen our hands come together in our sleep. Not cool.

I moved away from Erica and stood up, stretching and shivering. The storm the night before had left the air crisp and clean.

While I was stretching, I found myself looking at John's outback hat. Back in Phoenix, before I knew him, that battered, brown, leather hat had conveyed an air of rugged nobility and had looked almost out of place on him. Now, though, silhouetted against the daybreak, it seemed perfect for this master of the desert who carried himself like a cross between an English aristocrat and an Indian chief. Very classy.

"What time is it?" I asked John quietly.

"Almost time to start moving," he replied.

"I'm doing my part," I said, and stretched more all over. "Any sign of your friends with the guns?"

He shook his head. "None at all," he said, and sighed. "They're turning out to be pretty good. Quite...quite clever."

"Quite homicidal assholes," I said.

John said nothing, but he seemed on the verge of saying something, so I waited while he found his words. "Jack," he began finally. "About yesterday morning..."

"Yeah?" A thousand thoughts ran through my head. I didn't want to talk about that night with Erica. I didn't want to make her look bad, but I didn't want to make myself look bad, either.

I needn't have worried.

"If you hadn't knocked Erica and me out of the way when you did," he said, "they would have nailed us for sure."

"Maybe," I said. I couldn't picture John going down.

"Definitely. I didn't even know they were there. They had all the time they needed to aim, and we were good targets for them, not moving at all."

He paused, and I said nothing.

"If you hadn't knocked us down," he said, "we wouldn't be here now."

"It was nothing," I said casually. "I wasn't even thinking. I just saw them pointing those guns and I kind of went on autopilot, I guess."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "If you hadn't, we'd be gone, and if you hadn't grabbed Erica when you did last night, she probably would have been beat up pretty bad on the rocks by the river."

"Forget about it," I said. "I wasn't thinking. I was just reacting."

He shook the thoughts from his head. "Anyway," he said. "I just wanted to say thanks."

"You," I said, "are entirely welcome." We stood silent for a moment. When it was clear that he was finished with what he was saying, I decided to ask him something. "How did you come to know so much about...the desert?" I asked.

He thought a moment before answering. "When I was a kid," he said, "my father used to go out to the desert for days, weeks at a time. When I was old enough, he took me with him. He taught me how to listen to nature, to live off the land."

"Was that around here?" I asked.

"Mostly we went up north, where it's a different kind of desert," he said. "But we were in this area quite a few times."

"So your father taught you how to live out here?"

"My father taught me many things," he said.

I nodded, and we stood silent for a few seconds, watching the fingernails of daybreak slowly getting their grip on the darkness shrouding the desert. With the others sleeping, I decided it was the perfect time to ask him about something else, something that had been on my mind all the previous day. "John," I began.

He'd been turning away. Now he looked back.

"Maybe it's none of my business, and I'm certainly not complaining, but yesterday...you...when you found out about Erica and me...you...I..." I ran out of words.

He understood. "You expected me to hit somebody?" he asked.

"Yeah. Me."

"For what?"

"For...for...you know."

He sighed. "Jack, two wrongs don't make a right."

"I know," I said. I hated being patronized. "But sometimes it sure feels right."

"Not to me," he said.

I didn't believe him. "Aren't you at least a little mad at me or Erica?"

"No, Jack, that would be stupid. I would be an idiot to expect that she had no life before she met me."

That made sense—it was what I'd told myself, after all—but something about his Ghandi-style brush-off still bugged me. "Macy said that you used to be live up in Winslow with a wife and kids," I said.

"That's right."

"He also said that you caught your wife cheating on you, and you just walked away."

"That's right," he said again, adding, "I have plans to take my kids back soon."

"But you didn't hit anybody?"

"Nope."

"Why not?" I asked, my voice growing louder.

"It wouldn't have been right."

"Why not?"

He held up his hand, motioning for me to keep my voice down and to give him a chance to explain. After a little pause, he said, "I don't like to act out of anger."

I ventured it again. "Why not?"

He turned away for a second, thinking. Turning back suddenly, he asked, "Do you believe in death, Jack?"

That caught me kind of off guard. "Well, I don't know," I said. "I don't really see what that has to do—"

"I don't," he said, his eyes alight with some strange passion. "I believe in eternal life."

"The heaven and hell kind of thing?"

He shook his head. "I believe that souls go on many adventures. That they live many lives in many different bodies in many different times. Understand?"

"Sure," I lied. "But what-"

"The only thing that remains constant throughout all your lives is your eternal soul. In a sense, your soul goes on these adventures to learn things."

He paused again, and this time I did not speak.

"Eventually, I suppose, your soul could degrade completely and be condemned to some damned place. Hell perhaps."

"How?" I asked.

He smiled a little. "By giving in to the temptations of lust, greed...or anger. Those three are the gateways to hell. They degrade your soul."

"So let me get this straight," I said. "Before you do anything, you ask yourself, 'Is this lust or anger or greed?"

"No. After a while, avoiding them is almost automatic. If you just view the world objectively, you'll see that those three are at the core of all bad news. They circle around a person, leading him from one to another to another until he's lost everything good about him, and his soul is an empty shell."

I thought for a moment. "So how would he get out?"

"The only way to win that game, Jack, is not to play. So when you tell me that you and Erica acted on your lustful feelings before I met her, you can expect me to be angry, Jack. But I won't be. I just don't play that game."

"That's...unusual," I said. "Is that something that your father taught you?"

"Yes," he said, nodding slowly and smiling. "My father was an unusual man. He was hard-working, genuine, honest. He loved the desert. Things like that are hard to find in most people. Things like that are what I like about Macy."

I let that sink in for a while. It was heavy and thick.

Around us the scenery had become hazy gray and was beginning to show color and contrast with the approaching sun.

Suddenly something struck me as not quite right. "What about back in Phoenix, John?" I asked.

"What about it?"

"Remember when I hopped over the fence to save the girl then you hopped over and beat up those guys to save me?"

"Yeah," he said. "What about it?"

"Weren't you acting on your anger then?"

He shook his head. "Every person has a right to be free and happy. When they tried to infringe on her rights, you stepped in to help her, out of respect for her. Respect for living things is good. When they attacked you, I stepped in to help you. We got into a fight to preserve our rights. That doesn't require anger, just an instinct for survival."

"What do you mean?"

"As souls living in these bodies at this time, we owe it to ourselves to survive with our rights. Survival is not just a right, and not even an option. It's our obligation."

I thought I understood what he meant, but I also thought he was somewhat misled. That night back in Phoenix, *he* might have been fighting for lofty ideals of soul survival and such. But I remembered I was angry. Not just angry. Fighting mad. "What would you do," I asked, "if we were to catch the guys who are chasing us now?"

"Turn them over to the police, testify against them, and move on," he said without hesitation.

"Before we turned them in, wouldn't you like to hit them just a couple of times? Just for their trouble?"

He laughed a little. "No. I don't want to get into it."

"And aren't you just a *little* angry about Erica and me?"

"Nope," he said. "Everybody makes mistakes. That's another of our rights. Becoming angry won't change it. It would just make things worse. I don't want that."

I didn't like being regarded as a mistake, although I certainly was one. "Don't you want to hit me just a little bit?" I asked.

John smiled wide and looked directly into my eyes. "Let me put it this way, Jack. If you're ever infringing on my rights and I have to fight against *you* for survival, I'll put a little extra effort into it, for Erica. I'm human too. And since I also have the right to make mistakes, Jack, why not?"

That made things clear.

## Chapter Twenty-four: Silent Solitude

At first I didn't know if I should take that as a subtle threat or not. After a moment, though, I decided not. If he'd wanted revenge, he'd had all kinds of chances to get it the day before. Because he'd repeatedly gone out of his way to help me, however, I could only believe he truly had no interest in revenge.

I wondered where he'd gotten his philosophy, or where his father had.

After a brief pause, John brought us back to reality. Looking at the spreading dawn, he said, "We should all be awake now. If they're going to come after us, it'll probably be within the next hour."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because now is when we're most likely to be sleeping."

He was right. We woke the others.

John woke Erica while I shook Macy awake. Macy jerked his eyes open and looked up at me, eyes all bloodshot and fuzzy. His expression ran a gamut of questions. First he didn't quite recognize me. Then he wondered who Sharon was. Then he wondered where he was. Then he wondered why I had woken him up.

"Sun's coming up," I said. "John says we better get up."

"Oh," he said. He stretched on the ground where he was. "Sure." With a groan, he began untangling himself from Sharon.

Erica woke right up, acting as refreshed as if she'd slept the night on a water bed. Sharon, when Macy roused her, stood up all stiff and groggy. "What's going on?" Macy asked, his eyes still fuzzy. "Are they back?"

"Not yet," John said. "But if they are going to come back, now's when they'll do it."

"So what's our move?" Macy asked.

"We should go to a place where we can keep a lookout for them. Some place we can run or defend from," John said.

"The hilltop again?" I asked.

"The hilltop," John said.

"Again," Sharon said.

We went.

In the gray light of morning, it only took us about five minutes to negotiate through the cacti and washes up the hillside. The morning birds had begun to awaken and chirp and trill their morning songs. The cool air and the exercise invigorated us, so by the time we took up watch posts around the hilltop, we weren't tired anymore.

As we took our positions, I couldn't help but notice the contrast of the girls. Sharon's makeup was now two days old. The remains of her mascara and eyeliner were smeared into black puddles around her eyes, giving her a zombie-like look. Her hair spray now held her hair securely puffed out on one side. She needed a makeover.

Erica was the other extreme. She didn't seem to wear much makeup to begin with, and she definitely didn't need any. Her face was clean and smooth and her hair only stylishly unkempt. If I had been Sharon, I would have been bitchy, too.

John sat facing south, downriver, Erica at his side. Behind him, Macy and Sharon sat facing north. I sat facing the sun rising out of the distant mountains to the east. High and far away, I saw three birds circling in the sunrise, already searching for breakfast.

"Hey, John," I said, looking back over my shoulder at him. He had gotten a piece of cloth from somewhere and was cleaning his revolver with it. "What kind of birds are those? Bald eagles?"

#### The Desert King

He turned to look where I was pointing. After only a couple seconds he replied, "Nope. Buzzards." He went back to cleaning his gun.

To me, the morning felt just a little colder.

"Do you think they'll come after us?" Macy asked.

"I doubt it," John said. "Now that they know I have my baby."

I could hear the confusion in Macy's silence.

"You mean Erica?" he asked finally.

"No, I'm talking about my revolver. This Brazilian .357," John said. I looked back at him again. John held his gun up in front of his chest. He and Erica looked at it with a certain reverence. "This baby."

"Oh, yeah," Macy said.

"That's a nice piece," I said to John, still looking over my shoulder at him and Erica.

"Thanks," John said. "I try to take good care of it."

I wondered what had made him think I had been talking about the gun and not Erica. I wondered why I was wondering this at all, tried to forget it, and instead asked a good question: "Why didn't that gun burn up or melt or something in the fire?"

John thought about this before answering slowly. "I took off the holster before we went downstream," he said. "I left it in the bed of Macy's truck. I didn't think I would need it, but I wanted it close by."

"It wasn't close enough," Erica said, almost wistfully.

"Yeah," I said, "I wish you had had it with you when they first started chasing us."

"Well, that's just the way things worked out," John said. "The tailgate was down, and the blast must have knocked it clear of the fire. We saw them looking around by the truck. They must have found it and taken it then. We didn't see Macy's rifle in the wreck of the truck or at the poacher's truck, so I don't know *where* that is."

"We didn't really look around at their truck too much, though," Macy said. "We came back as soon as we realized they weren't there." "That's right. They probably have it," John said, then added, "they know I have this one now, though, so they'll think twice before coming after us."

Sharon had been thinking. "You really don't think they'll come back?" she asked.

"Nope," John said.

"Then we're sitting here watching for nothing?"

"No, we're watching for them to come back."

"Why would they come back if they know you have your gun?"

"Because," he said, "they also know I shot at them three times last night. *And* they know this gun only holds six bullets. *And* they know I didn't take any bullets from their truck."

"Oh," Sharon said.

"Wait a second," Erica said. "You only have three bullets left in the gun?"

"No."

"But you said you didn't take any from their truck."

"That's right."

"So where..." She didn't finish her question.

John patted the pocket of his vest and we all heard the dull clinking noise. Bullets. "I try to be prepared," he said. "Sometimes things get out of hand, but I try to do what I can."

"Cool," Macy said. "Now I hope they try to come after us."

Whether we agreed or disagreed, we did so in silence.

Then the bombshell dropped.

"I don't see why," Sharon mused after a few minutes, "we don't just turn Jack loose and let him go torture the poachers."

I wanted to kill her. I heard John and Erica turn to look at her, then at me. I said nothing and kept watching the sunrise.

"After all," Sharon continued, "he's got experience."

"Sharon, why don't you just shut up," Macy said.

"What are you talking about?" Erica asked.

Sharon forged on, and I loathed her. "Jack tortured some guy up in Kingman a few years ago. I thought everybody knew."

"Sharon, just quit," Macy said.

"What? Why?" Erica asked.

"I'm sure he had some good reason," Sharon said.

"Now," Macy said.

"He raped Diane," I said. I really didn't want to get into another discussion of it.

Sharon was sharply quiet. Apparently she hadn't known.

"You tortured the guy?" Erica asked.

I sighed. "Diane didn't want to press charges. I had to make him pay—somehow." I felt pleased with this admirable brevity.

Erica said nothing. Sharon said nothing. She hadn't known the full story before, not that anyone knew the *full* story now. Macy and John said nothing.

Silence settled among us thicker than fog.

Through that moment of quiet came the distant rattle of a truck's engine. We perked up in curiosity and apprehension. I was grateful for the distraction.

"Is that the poachers' truck?" Erica asked.

"Sounds like it," Macy said.

He couldn't tell. All trucks sound like trucks, especially coming from over the bluff and across the river. I abandoned my eastward watch and joined the others in scanning the ground to the west for the source of the noise.

"It's coming from about where they were parked last night," John said. I trusted *him*.

"I can't see anything there," Erica said. "Is it them?"

"It's got to be," Macy said.

"It could be someone else," John said.

"Great," I said. "This is the same situation as last night with the fire. If it's them, we stay. If it's someone else, we go." I sat down again, tired and disgusted. "I suppose you and Macy will go over and check it out?"

A thoughtful pause followed, but not for long. A moment later we heard the engine noise growing softer.

"Are they slowing down?" Sharon asked.

"No," John said, "they're moving away."

"Great," Sharon said. "It was probably somebody else, then."

"I doubt it," John said. "That's probably the poachers, leaving now."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Because if they had left last night I probably would have heard them."

"Then where are they going now?" Erica asked.

"Same as before," John said. "They could be trying something tricky. They could be going home."

We listened. The truck growled more and more softly as it moved away, headed downriver. We never did get a glimpse of it to confirm that it was the poachers. However, we didn't doubt it. Finally we could hear it no more.

I sighed deeply. "What do we do now, John?" I asked.

He sighed, too. "You don't want to know," he said.

"You're right," I said. "But what do we do?"

"Now, we wait."

"Wait?" Sharon said. "For what?"

"For a while."

"Why?"

John sighed again. "With the poachers gone it's just us and the desert."

"And the buzzards," I added.

"Nobody is going to come out here after us," John continued. "Probably no one will be out here at all till this weekend at the earliest. The weekend is still three days away, and it's still forty miles back to Phoenix."

"We're not going to wait here till this weekend, are we?" Macy asked.

"Of course not," John said.

"How are we going to get back, then?" Sharon asked.

"You're wearing them," John said. He pointed at her shoes.

"We're going to walk forty miles?" she asked.

"Actually, we'll only have to walk till we find someone to give us a ride."

"How far is that?"

"Probably only to Sheep Bridge. Maybe all the way to Horseshoe Lake."

"How far is *that*?"

John looked downriver, thinking. "Along the river, it's about twelve miles to Sheep Bridge. Probably twenty to Horseshoe Lake."

"That's not far," Macy said. "We can make it to Sheep Bridge in about four hours."

John shook his head. "We could if it was level ground, but we have to deal with the hills and the vegetation."

"So it'll slow us down a little," Macy said. "If we leave now we'll be to Sheep Bridge by about noon, Horseshoe Lake around four, and home by dinner time."

John shook his head again, smiling gently. "If we leave now, we won't even make it half way."

"Why not?"

"You're forgetting," John said. "This is the desert, and this is July. In a couple of hours it'll be up over a hundred degrees out here. That kind of heat takes your breath away even when you're doing nothing, let alone hiking."

"Couldn't we just cut across the desert to Sheep Bridge?" I asked. "I mean, the river surely doesn't go straight, and couldn't we save time if we did?"

John gave me a dark look. "No way," he said. "We better stay by the river." He took a deep breath, like he was choosing his words carefully, then gestured toward the river with one arm. "Not only is the river our only source of water, it's our only sure guide out of here. The desert is a big place." He paused and shook his head, looking out toward the distant mountains. "It's easy to get lost there."

"So what do we do?" Macy asked. "Wait here until dark?"

"Exactly," John said. "Anything else would be foolish."

"Shit," Sharon said. "Another day in the fucking desert."

"Yeah," John said glumly. "I know something that will make it a little better, though."

"What?"

John didn't answer. Instead he walked slowly down the hillside, alternately looking for something on the ground and something in the sky. After a few steps, he paused and picked up a stone about as big as his fist. Stopping in front of a big saguaro cactus, he cocked his arm back, taking aim at something up in its branches.

"What?" Sharon asked again.

"Cactus candy!" Macy said excitedly. "Come on!"

We followed him down the hill as John let the rock fly. It arced into the air and thudded into the cactus, knocking a roundish red thing down to the ground. Macy picked it up and showed it to me and the girls triumphantly. "Cactus candy," he said again.

"What do you do with it?" I asked.

"You eat it," Macy said.

"It's a fruit," John said. He was already taking aim at another.

"And it's gooood," Macy said. As we stepped back out of the way of John's next rock, Macy broke the fruit open and showed us. The inside was pink and seedy, kind of like a pomegranate. He took a bite out of it and offered it to Sharon as another one thudded to the ground.

"Mmm," Sharon said, "it is good."

"I've heard of these," Erica said, going to pick up the one John had just knocked down. While she split it open and began eating, Macy joined John and they both moved slowly down the hillside, throwing stones and knocking the fruit out of the cacti. Soon we were all eating our fill of the watery, tasty treats.

Though I didn't feel sociable after Sharon's surprise revelation, I was very hungry, and I joined in the breakfast of the cactus candy. I was amazed at how good they tasted, considering that they were growing wild in the desert. I could see how they had gotten their nickname; they were sweet and delicious.

After a while we'd eaten our fill, saved some for later, and settled down for our wait through the heat of the day.

I sat apart from the others.

Somehow, the day seemed both longer and shorter than a day. With the poachers gone and the heat rising, the desert stayed mostly quiet. We spent rest of the morning catching up on the sleep we'd missed the night before. I spent quite some time thinking about coffee. I hadn't had any since we'd left Macy's house two mornings earlier, and even as the day heated up I was yearning for a hot cup of coffee. I hadn't noticed if Macy had brought any with him, but even if he had it was stuck or destroyed in the wreckage of his truck. I wasn't going to get another cup of coffee until we got back to Phoenix. Damn.

By afternoon we were well-rested, and the others had come to accept the waiting. Except for constantly keeping vigilant for the return of the poachers, they might have been having a good time. They talked about what they'd see on the walk downriver. John agreed to leave a couple hours before sunset so that we could take in some sights before the sun went down. Macy scouted around, looking for a good walking stick. Erica helped Sharon fix her hair and face. John got a stick and drew designs in the sand, asking the others what they thought about a new tattoo.

While the others planned and played in the sunshine, I brooded in the shade. I wasn't having a good time. I felt like an outcast. I didn't dare

### T. F. Torrey

to talk to anyone because I could feel the questions Erica and John wanted to ask. I didn't want to talk about it, and it wasn't any of their business anyway.

So I sulked in silence, and the day dragged on. I knew exactly whom to blame for my solitude. And when Macy and John and Erica went down to the river in the afternoon to catch some fish, they left me alone with her on the hill.

### Chapter Twenty-five: Single Steps

Once Sharon and I were alone I popped the question, the big one I'd been dying to ask ever since I'd met her again back in Phoenix: "How come you're such a bitch?"

My bluntness shocked her. "Excuse me?" she said.

"Are you this obnoxious with everyone you meet," I asked, "or do you save it up for special people?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the way you treat Macy and me and everybody," I said. I was on a roll, and it felt great. "Nothing anyone does is ever good enough. Every problem you have is someone else's fault, someone else's responsibility. Is this just your new personality, or are you on some kind of bitch crusade?"

"I'm not that bad," she said.

I laughed out loud and shook my head, gesturing now with both hands. "Yes, you are, Sharon," I said. "You're worse than that. Especially to Macy. Nothing he does is good enough for you. You constantly have to nag at him."

"It's not my fault," she said quietly.

"See, there you go again. It's somebody else's fault."

She turned away from me. I jumped back in front of her and kept going.

"When I knew you before you weren't this way," I said. "You and Macy got along great. You were each other's best friends. Now you're—" "That was then," she snapped. "Everything's different now."

"Because you're married?" I asked. "Lots of people-"

"No, not because we're married. It's because of Macy, your buddy."

"Hey," I said. "Married people have problems, but it's a two-way street."

"It's not like that," she said. She turned away again. This time I didn't jump in front of her. "Macy ruined everything."

"How? By coming out here?"

"No. Way before this. Back in California."

Now I was at a loss for words. Except one: "How?"

She sighed. "Back in California we—we didn't have to worry about things," she said, speaking softly. "Everything was safe. Now, now I think about having this baby, and I wonder if we'll be able to afford diapers and formula. I wonder if Macy will even be around to see the baby. If he'll be out here gallivanting with John and not even see me."

I heard her sniffle. I said nothing.

"My family back in California," she continued, "they keep saying they'll take me in if I just leave Macy. But...I don't want to leave him. I love him. But he's ruined everything."

I heard her sniffling again, and I realized that she was crying. Way to go, Mr. Tough Guy, I thought, make the girl cry. I said, "I–I had no idea."

"Well, now you know," she said, straightening up, brushing away her tears with the back of her hand. "And now *I* know that I'm not the only one who can criticize things without knowing about them."

She walked away then, leaving me with my thoughts. Walking carefully and slowly, she moved down to the edge of the bluff and sat where she could see the others fishing.

I sat down and stayed where I was, feeling foolish. I used John's drawing stick and drew crude pictures in the sand, thinking. After a while I smoothed over what I had done and drew the word *NO* and practiced using it in a sentence: "No, I will not go fishing with you in the desert."

#### The Desert King

John and Macy and Erica came back a little while later with a stack of fillets. Because it was daylight, John built a little fire and cooked the fish. Everyone was grateful. I wasn't hungry, but I ate anyway. I didn't want to die in the desert, either.

While the sun descended to sunset, John extinguished the fire and we napped more. Macy and Sharon talked quietly. So did John and Erica. If it hadn't been so hot, I would have felt left out in the cold.

I was napping again when John nudged me and said it was time to move out. The others were already ready.

Someone wise once said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Apparently we weren't the first travelers to have their truck blown up out in the middle of nowhere. Anyway, with our flurry of single steps, our journey began.

John, of course, with his outback hat slung low, took the lead. Erica stuck close behind him. Macy, with his walking stick in his hand like some kind of commanding general, trudged along behind Erica. Sharon stayed close to his side.

I brought up the rear, not feeling as depressed as earlier, but not ready yet to dance a jig, either.

Downstream, the bluff sank slowly to the riverside. Today the river seemed swollen considerably. It looked older, darker, somehow angrier. The vegetation grew thicker as the bluff became a riverbank, and we had to go slower, as John had said we would.

Soon we came to a wash flooded by the swollen river. At the edge of it we stood in a bunch. It was about six feet wide, all dark and murky. To our left it cut through the riverbank and snaked off through the underbrush.

"What do we do now?" Erica asked. "Go around?"

"Mmm," John said, looking around quickly. "That seems like a waste."

"I'm going to catch my breath," Sharon said. She was already getting winded, and we'd only gone maybe a mile. "We could jump over it," Macy suggested.

"Mmm," John said. "Maybe *we* could, but it might be kind of far for the girls."

The girls didn't argue.

"They could use my walking stick and vault over," Macy suggested.

Nobody argued with that one.

"Why don't we just wade through?" I asked. "It can't be very deep."

"Mmm," John said. "Tonight will be cold enough without being wet. Besides, we can't tell how deep it is, especially after that storm last night."

"What?" I said. "That storm missed us by at least a couple of miles. You really think it will affect the river down here."

"Sure," John answered. "It rains up in the mountains and the water runs off and causes flash floods downstream. People get killed almost every year by thinking the rain missed them."

"Wow," I said. Nobody else said anything right away, surveying the situation silently.

"Then it looks like we *have* to walk around," Erica said finally.

"Maybe not," John said. He turned and walked back into the vegetation. "We need...we need..." He looked around, then spotted something. "Here," he said. "Give me a hand with this."

We walked over to where he stood by a tree maybe twenty feet long and ten inches thick at its base. It had been knocked over by the wind or age or whatever. With John giving directions, we dragged it to the wash, stood it up on its base, and let it fall across the wash.

"Wow," Macy said. "The perfect bridge."

"Mmm," I said. "Not perfect, but it'll do."

It did. Within two minutes we were all across.

"You know," Erica said almost proudly. "We make a pretty good team."

I'd been thinking the same thing myself. As we continued our sunset stroll down the Verde River, I thought more about that team. John was the undisputed team captain. It was his leadership that had brought us out here, his preparation that had fed us fish and kept us alive, and his skill and ingenuity that would take us back.

In an environment as hostile as the desert, where everything that grows will prick you and everything that crawls will bite you, we needed Erica. Her nursing skills would keep minor injuries from becoming major problems. And she was good to look at.

Macy provided a kind of enthusiastic extension of John Lupo. Without question he'd lend his hands and body to the efforts of John and the team. And he was not without his own skills, which he'd learned from John.

Sharon? Maybe she was the comic relief. No, that was Macy. Bitchy relief? No, that wasn't really fair. I supposed that without her we all might have become overly optimistic and floated home on our own lofty expectations. Instead, we were walking.

I stopped wondering about Sharon's worth and wondered about my own. Being mostly ignorant of the ways of the desert, about the best I could do was follow without griping. And I could paint. My paintings could portray the despair and triumphs of the team for posterity. Except that I'd lost my sketchbook back when the poachers had first shot at John and Erica and me. Oh, well. I could draw and paint from memory. No way could I ever forget this trip.

The insects in the wild desert frequently lifted a cacophony into the hot, dusty air, and with the approaching evening they were in full swing there by the river. Suddenly, though, a humming, buzzing noise off to my left rose through the din and caught my attention. Looking up, I couldn't miss seeing the giant black insect flying my way, headed straight for me. It made a noise like a June bug, but it was clearly bigger than one. And louder.

I stopped in my tracks. Most animals will avoid people, and I figured that this one be no different. I expected it to fly past me or around me and out over the river. Instead, it flew right up to me. Like a kamikaze pilot in a little black plane it flew right at me. Right at my face.

"Hey!" I shouted, ducking and swatting.

It missed me when I ducked, and I was amazed when it circled around for another pass at me.

As I backed away, my chest tightening with rising panic, I could see Macy and John running up behind the insect, back toward me.

I swatted and ducked again as the creature made another run at my face, and this time my open palm struck its hard body. It dropped swirling onto the rocks, bounced hard and landed upside down. As I watched in amazement it struggled to right itself.

Before it could, John Lupo's foot came down on it. We all heard the sickening crunch, as though he had stepped on a pile of twigs. Big twigs.

Sharon and Erica approached cautiously behind Macy and John as we all looked down at the insect. It looked no less dangerous on the ground. Its thick, leathery wings must have had a span of six inches. Its torso was almost as long, black and nasty. From its head stretched huge jaws, still biting up at the air. Incredibly, despite John stepping on it, it wasn't dead. That was one tough bug.

I was panting. "What, the hell, is that?" I asked.

"That," Macy said, smiling, "is a hellgrammite. They're like the Tasmanian devils of the desert."

"It's hideous," Erica said.

"Yep," John said grimly, and with that he stepped on it again, twisting his foot and grinding it into the rocks and sand.

Sharon looked at him inquisitively. "What happened to what you said before with the snake and the scorpion?" she asked. "You know, how the desert's a dangerous place and we just have to let them live—"

"Not hellgrammites," John said, cutting her off sharply. "Those things will take a wicked bite out of you. I *hate* those things." He stopped. I could see that other words were in his head, but he didn't elaborate

### The Desert King

further. This, it seemed, had actually shaken him, and at that we were all quiet.

It was the first time I had seen a hellgrammite and the first time I had seen John rattled. Both had caught me off guard. I would see more hellgrammites, but I would not, however, see John rattled again.

By now we had gone quite some distance downstream, though how far I couldn't really tell. We'd been walking, I guessed, for well over an hour, but of course we weren't walking in a straight line. I figured we had gone three miles at most, but probably not more than two.

Here the river spread out wide, maybe fifty or sixty feet across, and grew shallow.

"Wow," Macy said. He had left the hellgrammite behind and was now looking at the river. "You can see the bottom the whole way across here. We could wade across easy."

"Should we?" Sharon asked.

"Why would we want to?" Erica asked. "The poachers are on that side."

"Yeah, but this side goes up," Sharon said.

She was right. Ahead of us the riverbank rose into a bluff again with the river up tight against it. We'd have to walk uphill to stay by the river. Sharon was clearly getting tired, so she didn't want to walk uphill if she didn't have to.

"We'll stay on this side," John said. "It's bad enough we have to be in the same desert with them. I don't want to be on the same side of the river."

"That figures," Sharon said.

We stayed and climbed. It wasn't as bad as it had looked, but it was enough of a climb to leave Sharon panting. My heart was still beating hard from my encounter with the hellgrammite. The vegetation thinned away as the bluff rose and leveled off about forty feet high. Our elevated viewpoint gave us an impressive view of the desert. The sun was just beginning to disappear behind the mountains to the west.

We got strung out a little as we walked up and along the bluff. Sharon slowed down to catch her breath. Macy slowed to stay with her. I slowed down more to stay away from her, and John and Erica, not slowing down at all, walked on away from us.

Ahead of them, the bluff and the river bent off to the east, our left. I was beginning to wonder if John and Erica were going to leave us behind when they stopped at the bend in the river.

At first I thought they'd stopped to let us catch up. Then I realized that they weren't looking back at us, they were gazing at something on the river or just across it.

When we caught up to them, before we said anything, we saw what the lack of locomotion was about. In shared silence, and with a touch of apprehensive reverence, we all stared across the river.

# Chapter Twenty-six: Discoveries

Right off the bat, something seemed strange to me. "Something seems weird here," I said.

Nobody else said anything.

We were overlooking a deep and quiet pool in the bend of the river. Downstream the river curved first to our left, then back to our right, then left again, like an S in which we stood inside the lower curve. Beneath us the water was wide and deep, but at the top of the S the channel narrowed into rapids where the water roiled angrily.

But none of that captured our attention. All eyes focused instead on the tan truck across the river at the top of the *S*. It was a big, four-wheel drive pickup, backed up toward the water, not quite as close as Macy had parked his. The truck had a dual-rifle rack in its back window and a jagged rock hole in its passenger side window.

"Is that the poachers' truck?" Sharon asked.

"I think so," Macy said.

Erica shaded her eyes with her hand. "That's it," she said. "That's the hole John smashed in the window. But I don't see the poachers."

"That's great," Sharon said. "Now they found us. They got us now for sure. We're never going to make it back to Phoenix." Almost sobbing, she moved over to Macy and put her head on his shoulder. He gave the top of her head a sour look.

"What do you think, John?" Macy asked.

John Lupo stood motionless. He had his outback hat drawn low against the setting sun, casting most of his face in shadow. It reminded me of the night I'd met him, when Macy and he and I had gone skating. Here in the desert he had that same air of confidence and control. I was glad he was the captain of *our* team.

His eyes probed the truck and the desert foliage around it, looking for the pair of poachers. He didn't say anything, and I wondered if he'd heard Macy at all.

But just for a second. Then suddenly I was thinking what great targets we were up on the ridge like that.

"If they *are* looking for us," Erica said, "or even if they're not, we make great targets up here."

The way our minds worked the same was uncanny, like we were somehow psychically in sync.

Macy and I looked at each other, then at John. He didn't take his eyes off the scene.

"Maybe you should get down," he said finally.

Instantly, Sharon dropped to the ground and sat facing away from the river. Erica crouched beside her, behind John, who remained standing motionless. Macy and I ducked low and crept to the edge of the bluff where we could gaze at the truck and look for the poachers. On John's left, Macy leaned on his walking stick and peered over the edge of the bluff. I hid, partially behind a mesquite bush, to John's right. We looked on in silence for a minute or so.

"Where do you think they are?" Macy asked.

John took a deep breath and let it out. "I don't know."

"Oh, great," Sharon said, sobbing now from exhaustion or whatever.

"They made a ring of rocks behind their truck like they were going to build a fire," John said.

We looked at the rough circle of stones at the water's edge.

"There's nothing in it," Macy said.

"Maybe they're out getting firewood," John said.

Erica moved forward to where she could see. She crouched so close to me that I could smell her. I didn't complain.

"Maybe they went after a deer," she said.

"Could be," John said. "Their rifles aren't in the rack."

"Oh, great," Sharon said.

"I didn't hear—whoa!" Macy's words were cut off by the sound of shifting rocks and sand. The ground beneath him broke loose and began sliding down the face of the bluff. Macy scrambled and pawed on all fours over the sliding mass. His walking stick and about nine square feet of earth disappeared. Before any of us could react, he dived desperately up to the ground beside John. I looked over the edge in time to see the mass of sand and rocks and the walking stick plunge with a chunky splash into the river.

Panting, Macy collected himself on the ground beside John. Erica moved over and grabbed Macy's arm. Reflexively, probably, but a little late. "Are you okay?" she asked.

I felt a strange twinge in my mind. Jealousy?

Apparently Sharon felt it, too. She got up and sat down between Macy and Erica. "Macy," she said. "You have to be more careful."

They exchanged gratitudes and I turned back to the river to ignore them. "That noise might attract the attention of—" I said, and finished quietly, "the poachers."

John already had his revolver drawn.

Macy noticed too, and both of us instantly ducked and looked over at the poachers' truck, expecting to see them there, rifles coming up at us.

Nothing. Still the truck stood empty, back up against the bubbling river, no one in sight anywhere.

"Jesus, John," I said. "I thought they were over there."

"What," Macy asked. "What are you doing, John?"

John didn't take his eyes off the scene.

Before he could speak Sharon exclaimed, "He's going to shoot their truck, like they shot ours!" She bubbled excitedly at the prospect of a little revenge.

"Wait!" Erica said suddenly. "We can sneak down and take their truck and drive away. Leave them here and bring back the police."

That sounded great to me. "You can just drop me off at home on your way to the police station."

John shook his head. "No, they can't be too far off. They'd see us or hear us before we could get down to the truck. Or they'd at least hear me start it up, and then there would be a gunfight. And we'd be sitting ducks climbing down this bluff to the river, or in the river, or in the truck. They'd get us for sure."

A brief, quiet pause followed. Then John straightened his arm, pointing the gun at some unseen target across the river.

"So, what are you doing, John?" Macy asked again.

"I'm going to fire a shot down by their truck," John said. "That'll bring them out to see what's going on. Then I'm going to shoot them." He said it without emotion, just matter-of-fact.

"Wait!" Macy said. "You can't just shoot them."

"Why not?" Sharon asked. "They were going to shoot us, weren't they?"

Macy was speechless.

Erica wasn't. "Still, we can't just shoot them. Even though they tried to shoot us yesterday, it's still illegal for us just to shoot them for revenge today."

"They'd shoot us now, if they had the chance," Sharon said.

Now Macy found his voice. "Two wrongs still won't make a right," he said.

I was getting really tired of hearing that.

"So what? So you just want to let them shoot us?" Sharon said.

"No," Erica said. "We should just walk on past them and continue down to Horseshoe Lake like we planned." "Horseshoe Lake's still a long way off," I said. "We might not make it that far."

"What do you mean, we might not make it?" Erica argued. "We can drink river water and John can catch fish. If we walk tonight and tomorrow, we'll be there no later than tomorrow night."

"It's not that simple," John said, somewhat patronizingly. "Why do you think their truck's there?"

We thought about that.

"They're going to camp there for the night?" Macy suggested.

"No. Don't you get it? They figured we'd head for Horseshoe Lake. Where else could we go? They knew we'd have to stay along the river, so they drove down here. They're not camping or hunting. They're waiting for us to show up so they can ambush us. They probably left the truck there as bait."

Again we were silent.

"Still," Macy said. "We can't just kill them."

"Why not?" Sharon asked.

"Because it's wrong," Macy said.

"And besides," Erica put in, "we'll end up going to jail."

"I'm not going to kill them," John said. "I'm just going to shoot at them. If I wound them, good. They'll go away and leave us alone. We don't really have much choice right now. *They* chose this. They're going to chase after us until they kill us."

Again there was silence.

"It's simple," John said. "It's us or them."

"I choose us," Sharon said.

No one spoke up to choose them, and John raised the gun again. All eyes were on the poachers' truck, scarcely able to believe the violence that was about to unfold.

The crack and roar of a gunshot pierced the desert air.

The next second happened very slowly. John pitched forward, twisting back toward us as he toppled over the brink of the cliff down

### T. F. Torrey

toward the river. I would always remember the look of bewilderment and surprise on his face before he disappeared. In that same instant, both Macy and I realized that the shot had come not from John's revolver, but from the vegetation behind us.

We whirled, the four of us leaping to our feet.

Maybe the bubbling river had distracted us, or maybe we were getting worn out, but somehow the poachers had managed to sneak to within a hundred feet of us. One of them, the one who had apparently fired the shot, was down on one knee, rifle butt in his shoulder, barrel pointing at us. The other poacher scrambled out of the undergrowth, swinging his rifle around to shoot. The one down on one knee drew back the bolt action on his rifle and locked it forward again. Suddenly they were both ready to shoot, and we had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

"Jump!" I heard Macy scream, even as we were doing it.

We hit the water like three big sacks of flour.

Coming to the cold surface, I briefly had a fear of being landed on by someone. The current swept us quickly toward the rapids up the *S*.

Ahead of us, John already bobbed along through the rapids. Afraid he would drown, I swam quickly toward him, fighting the powerful undercurrent. The water became fairly shallow when I got into the rapids. I could have stood if I had been able to fight the current. Over the frothing of the river and my own splashing, I could hear Macy shouting to Sharon.

The water around John was pink with blood. He tried weakly to swim with one arm, barely managing to stay above the surface. His face was twisted in pain. I grabbed his vest at the shoulder to try to help him float. As I did, my fingers slipped through a hole in the vest into a soft and warm and fleshy hole in his shoulder. If I hadn't been so concerned with staying alive, it would have been sickening.

I grabbed the other shoulder of his vest. The river now whisked us through the top of the S. About twenty feet away I saw Macy's head bobbing in the water as he swam toward us. Just then another gunshot cracked through the air, and a bullet plunked into the water a few feet from me.

Desperately I tried to think of a way to get away. Here the river was channeled too narrowly, the water too swift to get footing and to get to the side. And even on the side we would have been easy targets. The poachers' truck was now by us on the shore. If we could only get out of the water we'd be able to hide behind their truck and probably even be able to take it and get to Horseshoe Lake, if we could hot-wire it.

The cold river wouldn't allow that. As we swept quickly past the truck, I briefly wondered how the poachers had managed to cross the river.

Glancing back, I caught one brief glimpse of one of the poachers standing, watching us from the top of the cliff. Then we were swept out of the top of the *S* and out of sight of the poachers. Still I fought the undercurrent and helped John stay afloat. I could hear the splashing of the others a little ways away.

After the S the river straightened out. Gradually the channel widened. The cliff along the east bank slanted lower and lower. The water began slowing.

Then my knee slammed into a rock in the riverbed and I lost my grip on John's vest. I bounced on the bottom and skidded along, trying to get to my feet. I stood up—just for a second—then splashed again into the water. I caught John's vest again.

I held on to him as we scraped and skidded down the riverbed. He flailed at the water with one arm, trying to get into a position to stand up.

Finally we got over next to the shore and managed to get to our feet. I helped John stay upright as we staggered and sloshed up the bank. "Are you okay?" I asked as we climbed out of the river.

"No," he said, his voice firm and controlled. "I've been shot."

I looked at him, and he was a wreck. The bullet had punched a neat hole through the back of the right shoulder of his vest and left a jagged exit hole through the front of it. Blood ran profusely down his right side, staining his vest and down the right side of his jeans. His right arm hung loosely at his side. With his left hand he pushed his hair back and pressed his palm against his forehead, closing his eyes.

"Holy shit, John," I said.

"Yeah," he said. His voice showed the pain. John sat down in the sand as I turned back to see about the others. Macy was helping Sharon up the bank. He saw John and his eyes went wide with terror.

"Oh, man," he said, moving straight past me to John. "John, you have to hang in there." He turned to me. "We have to get out of here. They'll be after us in a few minutes."

Sharon sat down on the sand beside me, exhausted.

"Wait!" I said suddenly. I turned back and scanned the river.

"No, Jack," Macy said, panic creeping into his voice.

"Macy," I said.

"Jack, we have to-"

"Macy," I said. "Where's Erica?"

"She's right ..." He looked back at the river.

No, she wasn't.

We scrambled back down to the water's edge. The sun had slipped below the horizon, but we still had enough light to see. The black ribbon of river stretched north and south of us, with no sign of Erica in it. Across the river, the bluff was only about ten feet high and sliced by washes. She wasn't there, either.

"Erica!" Macy shouted, his voice echoing faintly off the bluff.

Nothing.

Sharon climbed to her feet and stood beside Macy, looking. We looked all over. No sign of her. We listened. No sound but the bubbling river.

"Erica!" Sharon shouted. The bluff echoed back her voice, and nothing more.

John's outback hat drifted next to the bank by my foot. I stooped and picked it out of the water.

Then I remembered.

Macy had just opened his mouth to yell again when I interrupted him. "Wait," I said. "Erica didn't jump."

"What do you mean, she didn't jump?" he asked. "We all jumped. They were going to shoot us and I said 'jump' and we jumped."

"No," I said quietly, grimly looking down at John's hat. "She wouldn't have jumped. She didn't jump."

"Why not?" Sharon asked.

I looked up-looked her in the eye. "She can't swim."

# Chapter Twenty-seven: It Gets Darker

One phrase kept repeating in my mind. Five little words: *One step at a time*. First things first things first.

Macy turned to me, close to panic. "What are we going to do?" he asked. Sharon, too, looked at me expectantly.

I thought for just a second. "First thing," I said, "is we have to stop John's bleeding long enough to get away from the river."

"We have to go get Erica," Macy said.

"Later," I said. "If we don't take care of ourselves first, we're all going to get shot."

Macy looked at me, understanding the sense of my words, then he looked wistfully up the river where Erica was, somewhere. "Let's check out John," he said, turning back.

For lack of a better place, I put John Lupo's hat on my head.

It fit.

John was in bad shape. His face was pale, his eyes were glassy, he was breathing hard and fast, and his whole right side was soaked with blood. He looked up at us as we approached.

"How are you doing, John?" I asked.

He smiled weakly. "I've had worse."

I smiled back.

"Where's Erica?" he asked.

My smile vanished. I looked at Macy. Macy looked at me. "She got out of the water upriver a ways," I lied. "She'll be here in a few minutes." I turned to Macy. "Use your shirt. You and Sharon get that bleeding stopped. Fast. I'm going to find someplace we can hide till we figure out what to do." I turned to go.

"Wait," Macy said as he pulled his shirt over his head.

I turned back to him impatiently.

"Their truck's on this side of the river," he said quickly. "They're on the other side. Maybe you can get to it before they do."

I thought quickly. Their truck was probably only a couple hundred yards or so back upriver. If I tried, though, one of them could shoot at me from the bluff while the other crossed the river. Unless—

"John," I said, "where's your gun?"

John thought slowly, in a daze. "I lost it in the river."

"Shit," Macy said.

"I can't chance it without the gun," I said. "I'll find a place for us to hide."

"Then what?" Sharon asked.

"One step at a time," I said, walking into the vegetation.

It didn't take me long to find a hiding place. Here by the river the foliage was fairly thick, and it grew right down to the water's edge. I found a small clearing amid the trees. We'd be able to find the clearing in the dark, and we'd hear anyone approaching or going by at the riverside as they trampled through the undergrowth. There was a chance that they could cut through the clearing as they searched the riverbank, but this would do for now. It would have to.

I went back to get the others. John now lay on his back. They'd tied pads of cloth to John's wounds using the laces from his moccasins. Sharon was washing some of the blood off him with a cloth scrap.

"Good," I said as I walked up. "Can he walk?"

He couldn't. He'd passed out from loss of blood or pain or fatigue or whatever. Darkness descended rapidly upon us. Sharon and Macy and I carried John carefully to the little clearing I'd found. We laid him gently on his back. "How do we get Erica back?" Sharon asked.

"I don't know yet," I said, "but if we don't take care of ourselves first we won't get the chance to get her back."

"So what's next?" Macy asked.

"I'll go back to the river and cover our tracks," I said. "You and Sharon get some rocks ready here. If they come after us we're going to need something to defend ourselves with."

"Rocks isn't much against guns," Macy said.

"I know, but right now we're kind of low on choices."

While they gathered rocks and I scratched our footprints out of the sand with a bushy stick, night finished falling. By the time we were back together, sitting around John, it was completely dark. I checked John. His pulse was steady, but weak. At least the bleeding had slowed considerably, perhaps even stopped.

"How do we get Erica back?" Sharon asked again.

This time I had a few ideas. "The way I see it," I said, "they have three alternatives. They can come after us soon, in which case we have to bean them with rocks and jump them before they realize where we are and start shooting."

"Maybe," Sharon said, "maybe if we're quiet they'll just go right by us without seeing us. Then we can sneak up and take their truck."

"Maybe," I said. "But they might just stay at their truck until morning, then look for us when it's light out again. If they do that, then we can wait here until late at night, when they might be asleep, and go attack them. If they're still awake maybe we can get Erica to distract them."

"How?" Macy asked.

"I don't know."

"Mmm," Macy said.

"What's their other alternative?" Sharon asked.

"They could get in their truck now, drive downriver, and try to trap us again."

"What do we do then?" Macy asked.

"I don't know," I said, and added, "I'll think of something."

There followed a thoughtful silence.

"So what do we do now?" Macy asked.

I sighed. "Now, we wait. If we don't hear anything by about one in the morning, we'll go after them."

We all hated waiting. The hours dragged past. The moon, full tonight, lifted slowly out of the eastern horizon. We kept checking on John and he kept being the same. Sometimes he groaned, but he didn't wake up. We listened intently for the poachers or their truck. All we heard were the night creatures chirping and trilling. We huddled together to share our body heat with John. At least the night wasn't getting too cold. Macy had used his shirt for John's bandages. If it got too cold, he'd be suffering, but so far he wasn't complaining. We would have taken turns sleeping, but Sharon was the only one who felt tired. She snored.

The moon rose all the way to lunar noon, brightly lighting up the night. As our eyes adjusted, we could see a little too clearly. I worried that the poachers would spot us if they came by too close.

In the crisp moonlight, I found myself thinking about "the team". We were hurting. In the course of a few minutes we'd lost our two most valuable players: John the captain and Erica the nurse. Now, for some reason, Macy and Sharon were looking to me for leadership. Maybe it was because I was wearing John's outback hat. At any rate, I needed John's help to get Erica back and I needed Erica's help to get John back. I had neither. Double damn.

Finally, the moon began to descend from its peak. Still we'd heard no sign of the poachers. John's pulse was still weak. My own heart thumped solidly in my chest.

It was time.

I shook Sharon and she woke up instantly. "What is it?" she asked. "It's time," I said. She looked around quickly. "Are they here?"

"No. It's time to go after them."

"Oh," she said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Stay here with John. We'll be back for you."

She was somewhat taken aback. "What if you don't make it?" she asked.

"We will. We have to." I looked at Macy.

He was petrified. "Jack," he began, "maybe we should-"

Something tweaked my attention.

"-wait a bit longer-"

"Listen!" I hissed.

We listened.

And we heard it. Someone, coming from the north, was trampling through the bushes right toward the clearing, right toward us.

The poachers! Coming in for the kill!

My mind was reeling. Did we have time to run? No, not with John. If we were quiet, would they pass by us in the dark? No! Damn luck! The clearing must have been along a larger path! They were headed right for us! Could we hide? No time! What would John do?

Suddenly, I knew.

I felt around at my feet. "Quick!" I hissed at Macy. "Pick up some rocks!"

I had already found a nice, fist-sized rock. I got to my feet.

Macy didn't move. He sat there beside John, stony-faced, looking at me like he didn't speak English and didn't care.

The poachers pushed through more bushes. They'd be practically on top of us any second.

"Macy!" I hissed, barely controlling the urge to shout.

Macy sat as if catatonic. Sharon looked at Macy.

I found another rock at my feet.

Sharon stood up.

I could hear the footsteps of the poachers on the rocks, just out of sight.

Sharon bent down and found a rock.

We straightened up and cocked our arms back, peering intensely through the moonlight, ready to throw.

The bushes right in front of us shook as the poachers began to emerge into our little clearing.

At the first glimpse of flesh, we let our rocks fly.

# Chapter Twenty-eight: Erica's Help

Because my rock had been aimed precisely at the head of someone very large and quite tall, it whisked over Erica's head and crashed into the bushes behind her.

As Erica flinched and ducked, Sharon's rock plunged into her abdomen, doubling her over at the edge of the clearing.

Already I had the second rock ready to fly. Slowly the quiet got into my brain. Erica wasn't the poachers. She wasn't walking ahead of the poachers. She wasn't walking with them. She was alone.

And she was hurt.

Sharon got to her ahead of me. Erica had fallen to her knees, clutching her stomach with both hands.

"Oh my God!" Sharon said. "Oh my God, I can't believe what I just did. Erica! Are you all right?"

Erica looked up meekly. "I'm okay. It's just a bruise."

"I'm so sorry," Sharon said.

Erica glanced at me, then up at John's hat on my head. "Where's John?" she asked. "He's not—"

"He's doing all right," I said. "He's back here in the clearing by Macy." Something on the ground caught my eye. "What's this?"

She had already rushed past me, hurrying over to John. Sharon went with her. I stooped and picked up the item that had been on the ground by Erica.

Macy's .22 rifle.

### The Desert King

Fucking bingo. Maybe it was my imagination, but I could have sworn that at that instant the moonlight turned up a little brighter.

Erica *and* a gun. The grand prize. I felt like whistling a tune as I walked back to the others.

While Sharon and Macy watched, Erica looked at John and checked his bandages and checked his pulse and—well, just looked at him.

"Is he going to be okay?" Macy asked in a hushed voice.

"If we get him out of here in time," Erica said.

"How did we do on the bandages?" Sharon asked.

"Fine," Erica said. "They stopped the bleeding. That's the main thing. Did he lose a lot of blood?"

Macy and Sharon nodded.

Erica looked grim, bit her lower lip. "Has he been asleep long?" she asked.

Again they nodded. "Almost since we got here," Macy said.

"We've got to get him out of here—to a hospital," Erica said.

"We will," I said confidently. "We're practically there already, now that we have you again." I held up the rifle for them to see. "And this gift you brought us."

"Hey, that's mine!" Macy said. "Where'd you get it?"

"She brought it with her," I said, nodding at Erica as I handed the rifle to Macy.

"How'd you get away from them?" Sharon asked.

"I just walked away," Erica said.

"What? How?"

"Well, after you guys got away they took me back to the truck in a big hurry. We crossed the river at the wide place we saw before the bluff. They were afraid you would try to get to their truck first."

"You were right, Jack," Macy said.

"So then what?" Sharon asked.

"So then they waited for you guys to show up. But you didn't. So a little after dark one of them went back across the river to look for you. The other one stayed with me at the truck. He said he'd shoot me if I tried to run." She paused for breath.

"Wow," Sharon said. "What did you do?"

Erica took a deep breath and continued, looking down at the ground. "The one with me at the truck was getting tired. His eyes kept falling closed and he'd snap them open and shake his head. When he wasn't looking I grabbed a couple of rocks, and when his eyes closed I threw them in the woods upriver."

"Why didn't you bash him?" Macy asked.

I gave Macy a sour look.

"Because I was afraid it wouldn't have hurt him," Erica said. "I just wanted to get away."

"So what happened next?" Sharon asked.

"The rocks scared him. He thought you were attacking him, so he ducked down with his gun and tried to see where you were. I just ran away as fast as I could. I'd seen this gun in the truck before, so I grabbed it when I ran. I didn't get any bullets for it, though."

Macy quickly checked the rifle. "It's still got seven bullets in it," he said.

"Great," I said. "That'll be all we need."

"Did they hurt you?" Sharon asked, sitting next to her.

Erica looked at John. "Not as bad as they hurt John," she said. "We have to get him to a hospital." She looked up at me. "How do you plan on getting out of here, Jack?"

"Well, we were going to go attack them right now, using rocks," I said. "I still think we should go, but now we can shoot them."

"All of us?" Erica asked.

"No, just me and Macy."

Dubious silence.

"Won't they hear you coming like we heard Erica?" Sharon asked.

"We'll be sneaky," I said.

"They weren't together when I left," Erica pointed out. "Even if you get one of them, the other one could still get us."

"We'll get them one at a time, then," I said.

"They've got more bullets than we do," Macy said.

"Look," I said. "Does anyone else have a better plan? I'm open to suggestions."

Nobody had any.

"I don't like your plan," Sharon said.

I was flabbergasted. "What else can we do?" I asked. I desperately wished John would wake up. "We can't just wait for them to find us."

Again we were quiet. Erica stared silently at John's closed eyes. Macy and Sharon looked blankly at each other.

"Okay," I said softly. "This isn't going to be easy, now that they took John from us. But we have to hang in there. John is. We've got to think of something, either to get away, or to get them off our backs, or both."

Macy and Sharon looked up at me.

"And we've got to think of something fast," I continued. "They could come after us at any minute."

Erica stood up and turned to go. "I'll be right back," she said.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

She looked back at me, her face as downcast as any I had ever seen. "Down to the river," she said. "I want to get some water."

"Be careful," Sharon said as Erica made her way through the bushes away from us.

"Macy," I said, "how far is it to Sheep Bridge?"

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe eight, nine miles."

"Eight or nine miles," I repeated. "We *could* make a stretcher and carry John that far."

"We *could*," he agreed.

"Of course," I said, "that would take a lot of time, though, and they'd have no problem catching up to us."

We continued the discussion, toying with various ideas of escape. Nothing seemed especially good. After several minutes Sharon piped up, asking what was taking Erica so long.

That was a good question. Macy and Sharon stayed with John, and I went to find Erica.

I found her on the rocks by the river, sitting with her chin on her knees and her arms wrapped around her legs. Glancing around suspiciously, I walked over to her.

"Erica, I—" I said, and stopped. Moonlight glistened brightly on the tear-tracks down her cheeks. She didn't sob; she cried silently. She stared up at the moon, eyes large and glowing softly.

I sat down on the rocks beside her. "What's wrong?" I asked. Immediately I knew it was a stupid question. What *wasn't* wrong?

She didn't answer.

"Don't worry," I said. "We're all going to make it through this. We've just got to be strong, that's all. We'll figure something out."

She looked down at the rocks and the river. "You don't understand," she said softly. "They've taken everything from me."

I spoke softly also. "What do you mean?" I asked. "You mean John? Hey. Don't give up on him. He's strong enough for two people. Three. He's going to be just fine."

She lowered her head so that her forehead rested on her knees. "You just don't understand," she said, her voice muffled by her pant legs.

"Erica, I'm—" I stopped short, staring at her arm. The sleeve of her jumpsuit was torn at the shoulder.

It hadn't been earlier.

Cogs and gears of my brain, long unused, switched on and began shifting through the gears.

Suddenly many things I'd previously ignored leapt clearly into my mind. Erica, this beautiful and fragile female human being beside me, had just today been kidnapped by two heartless poachers. Earlier, these same poachers had remarked about her beautiful lips. Her story about being their prisoner had been sketchy at best. She'd said that they'd hurt her "not as bad" as they'd hurt John. Now she said that they had taken everything from her, and she insisted that I wouldn't understand.

She lifted her head again to stare at the moon. Drops of liquid moonlight flooded over her cheeks onto her pant legs.

It wasn't the night that chilled the blood flowing through my limbs. It was my own sudden, dark, and obvious conclusion.

"Erica," I asked, very softly, "did they rape you?"

# Chapter Twenty-nine: [untitled]

There are certain times and certain places where I despise and loathe silence with every fiber of my being. This was one of those times.

I wanted her to laugh denial in my face. I wanted to hear the soft whisper of her hair as she shook her head in renunciation. I wanted her to scream *NO*! so loudly that the noise would pierce my eardrums.

Instead, silence.

They had.

I turned my own gaze up to the moon. I wanted so desperately to break the silence, but what could I say? That I understood how she felt? I couldn't possibly. That it wasn't so bad? It was. That she would get over it? Maybe, but not soon. That they would have to answer for their crimes in the court of God? I wished I knew that myself.

I could tell her that we would make them pay here, that we would carve our own revenge on their bodies.

But would that help any? Would that change anything?

The Song of Hatred goes on and on, and the only way you can truly change it is to not contribute a verse.

Finally Erica broke that hated silence. "I just kept hoping and praying," she said, "that you guys would come back and stop them."

The breath was gone from my chest, replaced with arctic ice. "Could we have?"

She shook her head. "No. The other one was watching for you. If you'd come back to the truck he would have shot you."

"Did they hurt you? I mean...physically? Did they hit you or anything?"

"No. I screamed once, and one of them grabbed my throat and put his fist over my face and said if I screamed again he'd fix it so it was my last ever. But they didn't hit me."

The dreaded silence returned. This time Erica sent it away after only a moment.

"It's funny," she said, completely without humor. "I would have thought they were too old to be still wearing class rings."

I think my heart stopped beating there. My throat was dry. "Class rings?" I choked out.

"Yeah. I saw the one on the guy's hand when he threatened me. Then I noticed the other guy had one, too. I thought nobody wore those after they got out of high school."

"What school?" I asked.

"What?"

"What school did the rings say on them?" I asked, but I already knew. I already knew, and I hated it. I hated everything.

"Deer Valley."

Suddenly everything made sense. Absolutely insane, chaotic, fucking sense.

It was all my fault.

The poachers weren't chasing us because of Macy's bumper sticker. They were chasing us because John Lupo, coming to my rescue, had beaten them up in Phoenix on Friday night, while we were skating. Only bizarre fate or destiny had put their truck behind ours on the desert road coming out here.

Of course it was them. Two giant Mexicans. Deer Valley class rings. The way they attacked as a team.

When they'd surprised Erica and Sharon and me they'd said, "You guys havin' a party?" They were repeating what I'd said at the doorway in Phoenix.

This whole damn thing—Macy's truck getting blown up, John getting shot, Erica getting raped—it hadn't started when their truck came up behind us on the road. It had started when I hopped over the fence into that back yard. *I* had started it.

It was all...my...fault.

I almost said so. I'd already opened my mouth to tell Erica, and I had to choke the words off in my throat.

How could I tell her? How could I tell any of them?

How could I make it up to them?

I couldn't. There was no way to undo the violence. The ink had dried on those pages. All I could do was my damnedest to get them out of this without causing any more damage.

Erica's voice again broke the silence. "We're never going to make it out of here," she said. "They're going to catch us for sure."

"No," I said. "We will make it out of here. They will not catch us."

"How?" she asked.

I thought for a moment. "I don't know," I said glumly.

She shook her head sadly and again lowered her head so that her forehead was on her knees. "It's over," she said softly.

I tried desperately to think of something positive to say. There was nothing. Nothing but silence.

"It's over," she said again. "They've won."

I stood up on the rocks beside her. Strangely, my heart seemed empty. Despite the tremendous guilt I felt for bringing these incidents on everyone, especially Erica, my heart remained an empty, cold, steel chamber, a solid part of a steady machine with a single purpose.

Someone rustled through the bushes behind Erica and me. I turned as Sharon emerged from the undergrowth. "Hey," she said when she saw us. "John woke up. He wants to talk to you." She turned and rustled back through the bushes.

I looked up at the cold white moon overhead. I couldn't tell if it was a moon of hope or a moon of despair. When I turned my gaze down to Erica she was wiping the tears from her face. She finished and looked up at me.

I felt like a strong machine.

"Come on," I said, extending my hand to help her up. "They haven't won yet."

## Chapter Thirty: The Plan?

"It's like I told Jack before," John was telling Macy when Erica and I got back to the clearing. "Lust leads into greed and anger and back and forth, twisting around and around each other, growing tighter, closer, more evil."

Erica rushed to John and hugged him, careful of his bandaged right shoulder. They separated after a moment and looked at each other.

The captain was back.

"I'm glad you made it," John said to her. "I was afraid you might not have jumped into the water."

Erica looked confused. "I didn't," she said.

John looked up at me. "I thought you said-"

"I did," I said. "I thought she jumped. I didn't want you to worry."

John looked back at Erica. "You're here now, though," he said. "How did you get away?"

She told him how they took her back to the truck and how she tricked the one and got away. As she had with Macy and Sharon and me earlier, she wisely omitted the rape scene. I was afraid that if she told him then he'd go off looking for the poachers right then, and he'd get shot again, and that wouldn't help us a bit.

He perked up when she told him about getting the gun. "Excellent," he said. He thought for a moment. "Did they see you take it?"

Erica shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"Perfect," he said, smiling.

That left us in a bit of an uncomfortable pause.

"How do you feel?" I asked John.

He looked up at my face, then up at his hat on my head. "Well, that bullet didn't have my *name* on it," he said. "But I think it might have had my *initials* on it."

"That's too close for me," Erica said.

"Me, too," John said. They hugged again briefly. He glanced around at the darkness and moonlight. "How long was I out?" he asked.

"Four or five hours," I said.

John looked up at the moon and nodded. He touched his throat. "I'm really thirsty," he said.

"That's because you lost a lot of blood," Erica said.

With his left hand, John felt the large pockets of his vest and pulled out the canteen. Of course he hadn't lost that; that's the way our luck was running. We couldn't shoot anybody with a canteen. He shook it, not finding what he had hoped to. It was empty.

"I'll go fill it up," Erica said, taking it from him.

"I'll go with you," Sharon said.

They made their way through the underbrush down to the riverbank, leaving Macy and me with John.

"How are we going to get out of here, John?" Macy asked soberly.

John sighed deeply, thinking. "Did they move while I was out?"

"Not that we know of," I said.

"I didn't hear their truck at all," Macy said.

John nodded thoughtfully. "I think I know what they're up to, then," he said. "They'll probably come down the riverside first thing in the morning, looking for us."

"Why wouldn't they just drive downriver and wait for us like before?" Macy asked.

"Because they don't know how bad I'm hurt," John said. "For all they know maybe I can't walk at all." "Can you?" Macy asked.

"Yeah," John said. "Slowly. I don't feel quite as strong as I used to."

"So what do we do?" Macy asked.

"If we try to get away, they'll catch us easily," John said. "So we really only have one option."

"Shoot them first?" I asked enthusiastically.

John shook his head. "Talk to them."

"What?" I was dumbfounded. "Talk to them?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'll tell them you guys walked all night and you're bringing back help. I'll tell them that we'll say I got shot accidentally. I'll tell them that the choice is theirs whether they want to go home, or go to prison for murder."

"How would the police even know who to prosecute?" I asked.

"I'll tell them you got the license number off their truck before you left."

"Why don't we just really go?" Macy asked. "Just go now."

"Because we don't have time to make it now," John said. "I'm going to tell them you walked all night. If we left now, they'd catch us before we got halfway, and then I wouldn't be able to say you were already there."

That made sense, but I didn't like it.

"What if they don't want to talk?" Macy asked. "What if they attack you?"

"Then we will have no choice," John answered, "except to kill them. You'll be in position on the bluff across the river, where you can see me talking to them. Jack will be hiding close to me. If they start to get rough, you'll shoot one. I'll jump on the other one and Jack will come out and help me hold him down. If he gets away, shoot him, too." His voice was calm and cool, completely in contrast to the violence he described.

"Why don't we just shoot them without talking to them?" I asked.

"Because," John said. "That's just a move of anger. We have to try to talk first, to give them a chance to do the right thing. And I really think they'll do it. Nobody likes prison." I said, "You know, if they take your offer and just leave, we *don't* really have their license number, and they *will* get away with everything they've done."

John shrugged. "Macy's got insurance. I'll heal. It's not worth doing the wrong thing, shooting them, over that."

I'd been thinking about Erica. "John—" I almost told him what had happened to Erica and why they were attacking us in the first place, but I stopped myself short. Something told me that it would have broken his heart, but not gotten him to change his plan. His plan was crazy, but it just might work. It would be foolish to start a gunfight if we didn't have to.

But what about Erica? Would they never pay?

"Still," I said, "if they attack you then we'll have to take them out, right?"

"We'll have no choice," John said. "Survival is an obligation, not an alternative. If they attack, Macy will shoot them."

Macy gulped. "I don't think I can do that," he said.

I didn't think he could, either.

"You can and you must," John said. "You must shoot them, without anger, for survival."

"Without anger?" Macy asked.

"Without anger," John said.

"Wait!" I said, my mind overflowing with thoughts of Erica and what they'd done. "Kill them without anger? This is too much, John. We should just shoot them and put an end to this."

"You're letting your anger get the best of you," John said.

"And *you've* gone completely *insane!*" I walked away furiously, headed down to the river.

Erica and Sharon were just getting back. They'd heard our voices and now they saw me stomping away. Naturally they were a bit curious.

"What did John say?" Sharon asked as I passed her.

"He said we're all going to die!"

I stopped by the river and stared at the bluff and the moon. I felt very angry.

If John's plan worked, then those assholes would get away with raping Erica. Of course we'd get away, too, but I wanted to make them pay.

I thought maybe I should tell John what they'd done to Erica. Maybe he'd decide to use his right to make a mistake of his own. Maybe he'd get a new plan and we'd lay waste to them.

No. It wasn't my place to tell him, for one thing. And for another, John wasn't the vengeful type. He was trying to keep a healthy soul.

It seemed that I almost had to hope that they *would* attack John, so that Macy would shoot them. *If* he had the guts. I knew the sixth commandment of the Decalogue had to be going on and on in *his* mind.

Double damn again.

I stared up at the full moon. The moon of anger and insanity. The moon of Christians and souls and perpetual life. This same, cold, emotionless moon had witnessed countless crimes over the centuries and had steadfastly minded its own business.

One step at a time.

I turned back to the clearing.

I'd think of something. If worse came to worst, I still knew where they lived—or drank, anyway. One way or another, they would pay. One way or another.

"How do you *know* they'll come downriver looking for us?" Erica was saying as I returned.

"I don't know," John said. "I just feel like I'm in tune with their minds."

"The same as with that rattlesnake that Sharon scared?" Macy asked.

"Kind of," John said.

"Cool," Macy said reverently.

### The Desert King

John went over the plan one more time. Macy would hide on the bluff. John would wait alone by the river. I'd be close by. John would say the rest of us were already at Horseshoe Lake. The poachers would then go away. If they didn't, John would give Macy the signal to shoot. Macy would then shoot one, and John and I would jump the other one. Either way, we'd be safe then to go on to Sheep Bridge and Horseshoe Lake.

Simple. And all without anger. Except mine.

Erica had a question. "What if they just shoot you as soon as they see you?" she asked. "What if they don't even give you a chance to talk or give the signal, or what if Macy can't shoot because he can't see them or you're in the way or something?"

"If anything goes drastically wrong," John said, "you'll have to run."

"Just leave you there?" Erica said.

"You'll have to," John insisted. "Because then Macy would only be able to shoot one of them before they knew he was there. And if I was shot again I wouldn't be able to jump on the other one. He'd be able to shoot you all, one by one. He has a bigger gun."

"I don't like that," Erica said.

"It's the only choice if I get shot again," John insisted. "Otherwise you or anyone else could get shot in the gunfight. And if Macy with the gun got shot you'd really be stuck."

They talked more about it, but John was right. If they shot him, we'd really have no choice. We'd have to run.

"One more thing," Macy said. "What is the signal for me to shoot one?"

"Simple," John said. "I'll start with my hat tipped down to my eyebrows. If they aren't going to just go away, I'll tip my hat way back on my head."

Macy nodded. "Okay."

That left everyone more or less satisfied.

"So that's it, then?" I asked. "We just wait for daybreak and Macy goes and you go and we wait again?"

John looked up at me for a moment. "No, Jack, there's one more thing first."

"What?" I asked.

"Give me my hat back."

## Chapter Thirty-one: Oblivious

High above the desert floor, there would have been bats flying that night. There must have been.

From their vantage point, they would have seen five people hiding in a thicket of bushes by the river. Some of them were talking quietly, some were dozing. None of this would have interested the bats.

Not too far away, if they had looked, the bats would have seen two other people quietly making their way downriver.

The bats flew on, oblivious to it all. Oblivious as the moon, the sky, the shining stars, the river, the rocks, the mighty saguaro. They had witnessed everything before, and the life-and-death struggle below was, to them, unremarkable.

### T. F. Torrey

### Part V: Wednesday

### Chapter Thirty-two: Wednesday Morning

The very instant that the first gray speckle of dawn appeared in the east, John sent Macy across the river to the bluff. Macy gave Sharon a quick kiss for luck at the water's edge, then waded slowly and silently across the river, holding the rifle up to keep it dry. The water never went above his waist. When he reached the other side, he moved upriver till he found a wash in the face of the bluff. Turning back to us, he gave us a quick thumbs-up, then disappeared into the moonlight shadows of the wash.

"It's time for me to get into position, too," John said after Macy had gone.

"Do you really think they'll come so early?" Erica asked.

"Yes, I do," John said.

Erica sighed. "I'm scared," she said.

John smiled. "Don't be scared. Everything will be okay."

"Really?" Tears lined her eyes.

"Really," John said tenderly. They kissed. If luck indeed existed, John's should have been overflowing when they finally separated.

John insisted that Erica and Sharon stay in the clearing. He and I went upriver a short distance to find positions for our last stand. Because John was weak from being shot and losing blood, he sat with his back to a tree by the water, facing north, upriver. I found a depression in the rocks between the clearing and John's tree and hid in it. At about forty feet away, I could get to him in a hurry, but the poachers didn't stand a chance of spotting me. I'd be too far away, however, to be able to hear what was said between John and the poachers.

We waited.

In the east, the stars over the bluff began to disappear as the sky grew slowly brighter. The morning birds struck up their songs. The cacti and bushes became black silhouettes against the pale sky.

I heard a faint rustling behind me, and suddenly Erica knelt quickly beside me in the depression.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"If something goes wrong, I'm not going to be in the clearing where I can't see or help," she whispered back. "I'm going to be here where I can do something."

"No," I said. "If something goes wrong, you need to be as far away as possible. I'll let you—"

"Shh!" she hissed.

We heard it then. Interlopers pushing through the underbrush, trampling over the rocks.

John stood up. Even with his right arm hanging limp, with his hand tucked into his vest pocket for support, he still had that air of calm control. Erica and I ducked low at the edge of the depression.

The poachers, their rifles held at their hips, emerged from the bushes and approached John on the riverbank. They had already spotted him. Smiling, they kept their rifles pointed at him.

Today they wore no sunglasses. Even with their hats on, this time I recognized their skulls. One had a smile about a mile wide, the other's face looked scrunched too small. Wide-face and Squash, the Mexican tag team duo.

I don't think John recognized them.

Squash spoke first, still smiling.

John spoke a long time in return, gesturing with his left hand.

The poachers' smiles faded. They said a few things to each other, then Squash shook his head.

John said something else, again gesturing softly with his left hand.

Squash replied with a sneer and again shook his head.

An electric chill ran through my limbs as John reached up and pushed his brown outback hat way back on his head.

Erica drew her breath in sharply.

The signal!

I stopped breathing. All my muscles flexed hard and tense as I prepared to rush forward when Macy fired. Time stretched longer. I still couldn't hear what John was saying.

Wide-face shook his head again. He was not smiling at all now.

I looked off to the right, past Erica, scanning the bluff for Macy.

Squash stepped closer to John and poked at his ribs with the rifle. I knew that if John had been healthy he would have used that mistake to separate Squash from his weapon.

Instead, a trace of a wince flickered across John's face. He pushed his outback hat back again, so far that I thought it would fall right off his head.

Still nothing.

Where was Macy?

The poachers stepped back away from John. They looked serious now. They were all done playing around.

Where the fuck was Macy?

There he was! I saw him as he rose to one knee among the cacti on the bluff. My heart stopped beating when I saw him shake the rifle and begin striking it with the palm of his hand.

The rifle had jammed.

Just as I looked back to John I saw Squash's rifle kick back into his hip.

The thunder of the gunshot rolled over us like a nuclear blast.

John Lupo staggered backward and collapsed into a pile on the sand. His hat flopped off his head and rolled away a few feet on its brim. I had to tear my eyes off John to look at Macy. He'd stopped beating on his rifle, but he wasn't aiming it. He gazed on the scene with shock and dismay and disbelief all over his face.

Even if he shot one of them now, the other would get us.

I looked back at John. He wasn't moving at all.

Our only chance now was to run, as John had said. We couldn't take them out. We couldn't save John. We could only run.

They *had* won.

I took one last look at John. He didn't budge.

Ducking low, I started to move back toward the clearing, to link up with Sharon and Macy and start running.

Erica was moving, too.

Only she was going the wrong way. Before I realized what she was doing she had climbed out of the depression. She wasn't running. She was walking, slowly, calmly, deliberately, toward the poachers.

"Erica!" I whispered, and ducked.

The poachers had already spotted her.

I wanted to run; I wanted to hide.

But I couldn't let her go alone, unarmed.

I climbed out of the depression and caught up to her as she approached the poachers.

Wide-face looked at her, and at me, and smiled. "Well, you don't seem to have gone away after all," he said.

# Chapter Thirty-three: Final Fight

Squash had cocked his rifle again. They both kept their guns pointed at Erica and me. Wide-face nodded toward where John lay on the sand and rocks and smiled. "Your boyfriend seems to have had another accident," he said to Erica.

Erica stopped a few feet from the poachers. I stopped at her left side. "He—he isn't my boyfriend," she said quietly.

I was so shocked I almost keeled over.

"What?" Squash asked, his smile gone.

"I said he isn't my boyfriend," Erica said.

I gaped at her in wonder and astonishment.

"Then why," Squash asked, "are you here?"

"I–I wanted to be with you," she said.

"Erica!" I said. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up, you," Wide-face snarled at me.

"You're lying," Squash said.

"No, it's true," Erica insisted. "I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Suddenly I realized what Erica was doing. She was stalling them.

"You're a fool," Squash said, not believing her at all. "You know we can't let you go now."

Suddenly I started laughing. Nothing was really funny. Nothing had changed at all, except my mind. I could feel the triumph welling up inside me. So there I was, laughing my guts out. "What are you laughing at?" Squash demanded.

"I'm laughing at you, you stupid fuck," I said. "You're the fool."

Squash squinted at me foolishly. "What are you talking about?"

"You aren't the ones who could let us go," I said. "We could let you go."

"You could let us go?" he asked.

"We *could*, but we're not going to," I said. I stopped laughing. I stopped smiling. "You're going to die here."

"You're full of shit," he said.

"Fuck you."

"Fuck this," he said. He took a step toward me, swinging his rifle up so fast I barely saw it coming. I flinched, but it wasn't enough. The butt caught me just above my left temple and snapped my head back.

The world blacked away for a second as I fell. I tried to keep my feet under me, but they worked too slowly. My vision came back as I fell on my elbow on a rock on the ground.

That's when the gun fired.

The gunshot noise wasn't the thunderous clap and boom of a menacing cannon, but the deep, strong, beautiful bass note of an orchestra.

It was Macy's gun.

Wide-face's hat flipped off his head. In almost slow motion, his head rotated to his right, revealing a tiny pink hole just above his left ear. His eyes turned gray and his face took on a purple hue as his body, probably already dead, toppled backward onto the rocks and sand.

I think it caught Erica off guard.

Squash reacted immediately. He stepped forward and grabbed Erica, spinning her around and pulling her back against his chest. His arm slipped under her throat, holding her tightly in front of him as a shield.

Erica grabbed his arm with her hands, but she was no match for his size and strength. Squash stepped back away, eyes scanning the hillside where Macy was, looking for whoever had shot his buddy. I got to my feet. I felt dizzy. I could feel blood running down my cheek. "I told you," I said. "I told you we wouldn't let you go."

"I'm gonna fucking blow you away," he said, spinning to point the gun at me again.

"Go ahead," I said. "You'll have to let your shield go to cock your gun, and my friend will take you out like he took out your buddy. Turn you off like a switch."

His eyes locked with mine. He thought about it for a second.

"Fuck you," he said, and twisted back looking for Macy.

Erica let go of his arm with her right hand. He didn't notice. She reached her hand into her back pocket.

And I realized that we had won. John Lupo had saved the day, by being prepared, three nights ago.

Erica took her hand from her back pocket, holding the birthday present John had given her. The silver tipped ends of the white handled folding knife gleamed like fire in the first morning sunlight.

Squash still hadn't noticed.

With smooth grace, she flipped the blade open with one hand.

"It's over," I said.

The shining blade disappeared into the flesh of Squash's thigh.

He screamed in pain and let go of Erica.

She pulled the knife out of his leg and spun around, facing him.

He stepped toward her, and instead of stepping back she stepped into him, surprising him.

The blade disappeared into his throat.

She let go and stepped away quickly.

The rifle fell from his hand and clattered away on the rocks.

He pulled the knife from his neck and a torrent of blood sprayed out in bursts, drenching his chest and splattering on the rocks and sand.

As he swayed and slumped to his knees, I heard myself say it again. "It's over." His body dumped face-first onto the ground.

# Chapter Thirty-four: The Eagle Flies

John Lupo wasn't dead. Even as the last poacher was falling to his knees, Erica and I were running to John's side. He was unconscious. He lay on his side with his face and shoulders turned to the ground. The bald eagle tattoo on his upper left arm screamed up at us. We rolled him onto his back.

He was a mess.

The poacher's shot had hit him squarely in the left breast. Erica opened his fishing vest to look at the wound. It was big and ugly and bleeding all over, with pink bits of flesh hanging out of it. As he fought for breath we could hear the air rushing into and out of his chest through the wound.

I looked at Erica expectantly. She was already going to work. Biting her lower lip, she covered the hole with her palm as she checked the other damage.

"Is he ... going to make it?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "He has to. He can't die now."

There was so much blood. I could only wonder.

I heard Macy running, skidding down the wash, splashing back across the river, then he and Sharon came running up together. "Oh, God," Sharon said, paling.

"Is he hurt bad?" Macy asked.

Erica nodded, lost in concentration.

"What about the poachers?" Macy asked. "Are they dead?"

"Who cares?" Erica said without looking up.

Macy looked over at where the poachers lay on the rocks. "I'll check," he said. He hustled over to them, kneeling by each only for a few moments to check for a pulse.

"Stone cold dead," he said as he ran back to us. "What do we do now?"

I knew. "Search their pockets," I said to Macy, nodding at the poachers. "One of them must have the keys to their truck. Their truck must still be up the river where we saw it last." I turned to Erica. "Can we move John in the truck?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not without causing more damage. We need a helicopter."

I turned back to Macy. "Drive as fast as you can to the park ranger station at Horseshoe Lake. Tell them we need a helicopter out here ASAP."

"How will they find you?" Macy asked.

"I'll build a signal fire."

"What about Sharon?"

"Take her with you."

Macy took a last look at John, then they were gone. Macy quickly found the poachers' keys and he and Sharon took off, running upstream to find the truck. A few minutes later we heard the engine roaring as Macy found the trail and raced off to Horseshoe Lake.

Then silence returned.

By now the sun had risen and it rapidly heated up the morning. Erica and I moved John to the ample shade of a cottonwood tree a bit downriver. I took John's hat, got his matches from under the head band, and built a huge signal fire on the riverbank. For lack of a better place, I put John's outback hat on my own head.

I gave Erica my shirt to help bandage John with, and she did her best to try to stabilize him. The damage was so extensive, though, that the best she could do was not enough. John's pulse grew weaker and weaker as we waited.

Though I was no more certain of anything than I had ever been before, I prayed silently that help would arrive in time. If there was a higher power anywhere, this was something worth talking about.

After Erica had patched the wounds as well as she could, she sat cross-legged with John's head in her lap. Tears slid softly down her cheeks as she whispered, "You *are* my boyfriend, John. You *are*. Please don't leave me."

Sitting close by, I watched the horizon for the rescue helicopter. High away in the distance, three birds circled in the air currents. I wondered what kind of birds they were, until one flew close over top of us, looking proudly down. The snowy white head left no doubt. It was a bald eagle.

The wait turned into hours. The sun pierced through the shade of the cottonwood and burned my bare back. I didn't mind.

Finally we heard the distant whirling chop of helicopter blades. The medical rescue helicopter had arrived.

But they were too late.

There, in the shade of the willowy cottonwood, beside the bubbling river teeming with catfish, in the arms of the woman he loved, in the heart of the raw and powerful desert he lived for, John Lupo had died.

# Chapter Thirty-five: Life

Overhead, unseen, the dark brown feathers of a female bald eagle ruffled in the updraft as she rode the thermal currents upriver, back to her nest. Some movement below caught the attention of her black eyes, and she turned a slow circle to see what was happening.

Below her, several humans were in a little clearing by the river. Two of them were not moving at all and, from the amount of blood on and around them, would be attracting vultures soon. A short way from them, two more humans sat with another between them. He, too, was covered in blood. Two other humans ran quickly upriver over the rocky ground.

The eagle dipped her wing and straightened out of the circle, heading back upriver again. These activities might interest the vultures, but they didn't interest her.

A few minutes later she alighted on the edge of her nest, where she found a pleasant surprise: her egg, that she'd been sitting on and protecting for weeks, was finally stirring. While she watched, a tiny thread of a crack appeared on the surface of the egg. Inside, she could hear her baby struggling to break free.

For the next hour or so, she watched its progress. The baby bald eagle struggled against the shell, slowly driving the edges of the crack apart. After a long battle, it pushed its head and body free of the shell. She tipped her head at him, happy and proud, and his little black eyes met hers. He was hungry and eager to get about the business of learning to fly and conquering the desert. She took off to get him some food. Of course, there's no real record that this happened that day, at that instant. It's nice to believe, though.

The Desert King

## Part VI: Later

# Chapter Thirty-six: Loose Ends

Of course the police agreed it was justifiable homicide. On our part, not theirs. We spent several hours answering questions, especially Macy and Erica, but in the end they didn't even charge Erica with possessing an illegal knife. Maybe they weren't illegal after all.

If either of the poachers had survived, he would have been charged with the murder of John Lupo, the attempted murder of the rest of us, poaching, and a slew of related charges.

Neither Erica nor I mentioned what had happened to her. Nobody was going to punish the dead. What the police didn't know didn't make any difference.

John and Macy's boss threw a fit at losing John Lupo. Then he gave Macy the rest of the week off and promoted him to foreman the next week. Another man was hired to work on Macy's team. After a couple of months, Macy started taking him to the desert, fishing.

Sharon's boss was not so understanding. When she showed up Thursday and asked for the rest of the week off he told her to take a permanent vacation. I hear she's a veterinarian's assistant part-time now and she likes it better anyway.

I found all this out later. I didn't see them for about five weeks after we got back. Well, after John's funeral.

Macy and Sharon are still together. It got rocky for a while and I suppose now and then it still does, but Sharon stayed with Macy.

#### T. F. Torrey

Sharon had a boy. She and Macy fought for a while about the name, but in the end Macy won, or Sharon gave up. They named him Jonathan Lupo Barnes. All Macy talks about is taking him fishing and hunting in the desert. The kid can't even walk yet and he owns a rod and reel.

My job was never really in danger. Buddy Robinson, the owner of Gridlock, covered for me the nights I was gone, and he was damn glad when I came back. After hours we sipped bourbon and I gave him the whole story. Well, all of it except for what happened to Erica. He listened intently, shaking his head a lot. When I finished, he told me that next time he'd call the park rangers the very minute I was late. I told him there wasn't going to be a next time.

For a while business boomed. Everyone wanted to hear the story of the bartender who'd seen John Lupo die. Tabloid reporters and television yellow journalists—they all stopped in to Gridlock to hear the story of the crazed poachers.

I never did tell them that the story really began in Phoenix, when we were skating. I never told a soul. No one needed to know.

Buddy Robinson ate it up. Some versions of the story he tells have him along on that voyage to the desert. I let him have his fun.

Sometimes people would mistake me for one of John's oldest friends. They'd ask me if I missed John Lupo.

They just don't understand.

# Chapter Thirty-seven: Erica and Me

It was about three weeks after we got back that Erica stopped into Gridlock.

I'd been thinking about calling her, but every time I picked up the phone to do it I thought of how that would look. I still had John's hat. It would seem like I was using the death of John Lupo to get into the sack with his undeniably voluptuous girlfriend. So even though I wanted to call her, to find out how she was doing, to see if she needed someone to talk to, someone who might understand, I never did.

And I suppose I felt just as guilty for not calling her as I would have if I'd called.

Anyway, a few weeks after we got back I saw Erica for the first time since John's funeral. The door to Gridlock opened and there she was. At first I thought she might be meeting someone. Then I realized that it was close to midnight—a little late for a rendezvous. Then she sat at the bar, where she couldn't see the door, and it was pretty obvious that she'd come to see me.

Just in case, I cautiously said, "Hello, Erica. Meeting someone?" It was a casual enough question, so why was my heart beating in my throat?

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you," she said, and her eyes locked with mine.

She left with me that night, in her car, and we talked until it was daylight.

#### T. F. Torrey

As the days grew into weeks, we saw each other more and more. After a month, if you had asked me who my girlfriend was, I would have told you Erica Bailey.

So Erica and I had our experience. We didn't run away and get married, but it still seemed terribly romantic to me.

Some people, mostly Sharon and Macy, called it a "fling". Others, mostly Erica, called it a "relationship", but I never liked that word, either.

It seems to me that people say "relationship" to denote an association that's going to last a while but which in the end is doomed to failure. To me, a relationship is just a long fling. Maybe with the charade and costume of infinite longevity, but finite just the same. Something you're going to be looking back on before you know it.

I thought what we had was-different somehow.

The first time I walked into her bathroom late in the evening and in the mirror caught sight of the double row of pink teeth marks in my shoulder, it seemed as if the whole desert trip had been a dream, as if it was the first time I had driven her home from Gridlock, and everything in between had been just a scrap of an ugly dream.

Sometimes we'd talk about what had happened and she'd end up with her face on my shoulder, her tears hot and wet on my chest.

"I just don't understand," she would sob, "why they ever started chasing us in the first place."

I never told her. I never could.

I don't know what happened. It was spontaneous and intense and emotional. I don't know if I ever really believed it would go on forever, but somewhere in there we both got the feeling that it would end.

And one morning I woke up alone and found myself looking back on the whole experience.

Maybe it was a relationship after all.

# Chapter Thirty-eight: T D K

Hands on my hips, I stood up straight, gazing proudly out over the bluff at the sparkling clean Verde River bubbling merrily toward the Gulf of California. The sun rose over my shoulder, already burning the chill off the morning. I looked behind me, back at the circle of stones where my campfire had been, to make sure it was out. Facing the river again, I took John Lupo's outback hat from my head and threw it like a Frisbee across the river to the opposite riverbank. With one last look at the river below, I put my hands together over my head and gracefully dived off the bluff.

This was the next spring, and this was my first return to Tonto National Forest since my trip with John and Erica and Macy and Sharon. Macy had asked me to go with him several times, but I had declined. Nearly a year had passed before I returned to the desert.

This time, I'd gone alone.

Maybe the reason that things didn't work out between Erica and me was that somewhere in my heart I held myself to blame for John's death. I saw myself sealing his fate the very instant my shoes touched the grass inside that dark back yard. In the back of my mind I envisioned my master plot for stealing his girlfriend. That had not been my plan, of course. But I got her, didn't I?

I never told Erica this, and by the end of the summer I had driven her away completely. All the way to Boston. I felt no better in her absence.

Autumn gave way to winter, and still I was alone, still pushing drinks and pulling tips at Gridlock. It was then that I tried to paint something from the desert trip. I never did get my sketchbook back, but I made new drawings from old, though vibrant, memories. I started several paintings, but the only one I finished was that scene I'd sketched where Erica sat watching John fishing. Except where Erica had been I instead painted a close-up of a bald eagle in flight, his talons stretched wide to capture his prey, his beak open in a silent scream. As closely as I could remember, it was John's tattoo. John I left the same, his outback hat slung low against the sun, his tan fishing vest open in the front, his left hand holding the rod, his right holding the line, feeling the nibbling of a flathead or a carp. I must say it turned out well.

I still haven't put together my Desert Sunset Panorama. Yet.

The onset of winter tucked a new idea into my mind like a harsh grain of sand into an oyster: I could go to the desert and live on my own as John Lupo had done.

By the beginning of spring, that idea had become a pearl in my mind. I sold my car, put my stuff in storage, told Buddy Robinson I'd be back when I got back, and hitched a ride out to the desert. Right before I left I got a tattoo—an eagle in flight, talons stretched wide, beak open in a silent scream.

I took some spray paint with me, and on the way out I decorated some development billboards with the word *RAPE*.

Quickly I learned how to live off the land. In the open wilderness, living with the mountains and the stars, I finally learned a sense of direction. I learned to build a fire with a pocket magnifier. I learned how to catch a rabbit in a snare and how to cook it on a spit. I learned to fish with just a hook and a line. I haven't learned how to catch a rattlesnake with my bare hands yet, but I've learned how to back away from one. And I, too, have grown to hate hellgrammites.

I wore John Lupo's hat. I thought a lot about him.

Somewhere in there, too, I learned that it wasn't my fault that Erica got raped and it wasn't my fault that John had died. By jumping over that back fence I'd been stopping them from raping that girl on the couch. I was sure of it. The decision had not been mine. I was not the criminal. John Lupo's philosophy struck me as most sensible: Avoid lust, avoid anger, avoid greed. In the desert, I'm learning to do that.

The crisp water in the pool chilled me, but I didn't let it distract me. I swam to the bottom and looked around, searching through the water for something. I found it pinched between two rocks on the riverbed, and it became mine.

Panting just a bit, I walked up the riverbank and found the outback hat. I plopped it back on my head and sat down to examine my river treasure: John Lupo's .357. A year under water had left it rusty and dirty. Living in the desert had given me an appreciation for guns. It would take quite a bit of time to restore this one to its original condition. But there in the desert, I had nothing but time.

I could go back to Phoenix at any time. Only two nights of walking separate me from Horseshoe Lake.

Or I could stay a bit longer.

I sat in the sunlight, letting the heat dry my clothes as I started cleaning John's revolver. Something high off in the azure sky caught my eye. This time I could recognize them even in the distance. Bald eagles, circling, hunting for breakfast.

This year, there are four of them.

Do I miss John Lupo?

No one should.

All you have to do is go out into the desert, out past the housing developments and the billboards that Greenpeace (or somebody) painted *RAPE* over. Go out to a little clearing next to a high bluff on the Verde, with the hot breeze on your face. And he's there, just like in my painting.

On a clear day you can almost see him.

He's the desert king.

### About the Author

T.F. Torrey was born and raised in western New York State, where cool forests cover rolling hills, corn fields and cows line gentle valleys, and whitetail deer carcasses litter the roadways. It was a great place to grow up, but he might be a redneck.

T.F. Torrey has worked as computer programmer, a dishwasher, a grocery clerk, a parachute infantryman, a hotel night auditor, a hotel desk clerk, a bowling machine attendant, a bartender, a door man, a car washer, a used car salesman, a telemarketer, a cab driver, a hotel assistant manager, a security guard, a hotel front office manager, and a computer what's-it.

Now, T.F. Torrey is part of the new revolution of publishing, combining classic narrative form and flair with contemporary long-tail publication venues. His short stories and serial fiction have appeared both on- and off-line, and his work is ever more widely read. He lives with his wife in Phoenix, Arizona. He and his work can always be found online at tftorrey.com.

The Rocktastic Corduroy Peach—big schemes, big dreams and some really big drama-queens.

### The Rocktastic Corduroy Peach © 2007 Michael Paul Amos

For Marcus Mason, young at heart guitarist with unsigned rock band Corduroy Peach, life is just one big shit-sandwich. The status of rock 'n' roll legend has thus far eluded him and, with the psychological milestone of his thirtieth birthday fast approaching, the chance of hitting the big time seems ever more remote.

Struggling to give up the damned cigarettes and haunted by the specter of an unhappy divorce, he hates his day job as a dog food salesman and wishes he could pluck up the courage to ask out gorgeous but nerdy Oxford student, Rose Finer.

When a throwaway comment by local celebrity Radium Mars puts Corduroy Peach briefly into the limelight, Marcus finds himself competing with suave drummer Dermot for Rose's affections, and fighting to remain in the band as insufferable singer Danny-boy tries to maneuver him out.

Not willing to let go of his dreams easily, Marcus struggles to work out if this is the beginning of the big-time or the beginning of the end, a question that can only be answered in a final showdown with Radium.

Warning, this title contains the following: foul language, strong sex references, mild drug references, cruelty to a cuddly toy, outrageous melodrama and poor personal hygiene.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Rocktastic Corduroy Peach:

"Look, lads, before we start I've got a bit of bad news."

Danny-boy, Dermot and Paul all looked at Marcus. His heart pounded.

"About the review of us in *Nightspot*, mate?" Dermot tutted. "We've seen it."

"Er, well, not that exactly..."

Danny-boy snorted. "We do not really need to worry about what that silly little rag says about us."

"We do, mate, because everyone reads it." Dermot leant forward in his seat, face set in a scowl.

"No, it's not about the review." Marcus felt he was losing them.

He was right. Danny-boy scowled back at Dermot. "Everyone knows that it's all written by that idiot Ninja who works at The Drumheller. It's one person's narrow, bigoted opinion, that is all."

"No, there's all different names in here, Danny-boy," chipped in Paul.

Danny-boy clenched his fists and looked up at the ceiling.

Paul failed to notice Danny-boy's irritation at his moniker. "Dirk Diggler, Ian Chesterton."

"They're just pseudonyms, Paul," Danny-boy cut in crossly. "They're stars from dodgy porn films."

Dermot's face lit up with glee. "Well, we'll have to take your word on that one, Danny-boy, mate."

Danny-boy reddened while Marcus and Dermot laughed. Paul looked again at the *Nightspot* with renewed interest. "Porn stars?"

Marcus thumbed his nose. "Ooooh, Danny-boy, what filth have you been watching?"

"I haven't been watching anything. I don't watch that sort of film. They're degrading to women."

"Ooh, mate, it's nothing to be ashamed of now." Dermot grinned mischievously.

Marcus shook his head, struggling to control his smile. "Danny-boy, I'm shocked."

Danny-boy, now almost crimson, spluttered. "Can we drop this please? Look, Ninja is part of the Oxford music clique. He can't cope with anything that doesn't fit into his narrow, passé idea of what is good music. For him, it has to be angst-ridden, tuneless punk rock. He simply cannot appreciate a good song when he hears it so there was no chance of us getting a decent review."

Marcus pounced. "So why did you send them a tape then?"

A long pause followed. Danny-boy bit his lip and looked down at his cup of tea.

Marcus remembered what he wanted to say. *Now. Come on, now. Do it.* He cleared his throat. "There's something I've been meaning to say..."

A very poor rendition of Radiohead's "Street Spirit (fade out)", consisting entirely of electronic beeps, came from Danny-boy's pocket.

Marcus sank back into his chair.

"Sorry." Danny-boy shrugged apologetically and pulled his mobile phone out. "Hello...er, yes, this is Corduroy Peach's manager."

In shared amusement, the others gaped the word "manager" at each other.

Danny-boy just ignored them. "Oh, hi, you got the tape then?"

The others listened, trying to piece together the conversation from the half they heard.

"...yes...yes...yeah, we'd be well up for a gig."

Danny-boy looked at the other three defiantly. A gig.

"On Thursday the fifteenth of May?"

Danny-boy looked around at the others. They all nodded enthusiastically.

"Yeah, we can make that date, what's the money situation?"

Danny-boy listened intently to the voice on the other end of the phone, nodding slowly.

"Yes...yes...fifty pounds? Okay, but we get that back if we break even on the takings on the door? Yes...okay, okay, great. Yeah, cheers for ringing."

Danny-boy hung up and then beamed at the others. "My friends, we have another gig."

"Where, mate?" asked Dermot.

"At The Drumheller on Cowley Road on the fifteenth—we're the headliners and they've got some stupid punk band called Djinni's Toilet as support."

"Hey, great name." Paul perched on the edge of his seat. "The Drumheller's a great venue too."

But Marcus was suspicious. "What's this business about fifty quid?"

Danny-boy shifted uneasily in his seat. "Er, well the bands have to pay for the P.A. and the sound guy which is fifty quid..."

"What?" roared Marcus.

Danny-boy shrank back in his chair. "We get the door money."

"I've heard of that before, me duck," said Paul cheerily. "I think they do that for everyone."

Danny-boy rallied. "Yeah, it seems pretty reasonable to me."

"What's reasonable about paying fifty quid to play in an empty fucking hall?" Marcus folded his arms, a burning sensation growing in his cheeks.

"It won't be empty."

Marcus wasn't satisfied. "What's the entrance fee?"

"Five pounds."

"Right, so five quid, on a Thursday night to see a band nobody's ever heard of." Marcus' blood was up. "I expect the tickets will go like greased shit off a silver fucking shovel, you know what I mean, mate?"

Danny-boy held his palms up defensively. "Look, it's a gig. Not the best gig in the world but it's a start."

"Yeah, come on, mate, be positive." Dermot clapped his hands together. "Our second gig. After all, playing live is what it's all about and it can't be worse than that village fete."

"We've got to go for it, Marcus, me duck." Paul's enthusiasm was such that he began swaying in his seat. "Gigs is what it's all about."

Marcus tutted crossly. "Look, guys, there's something I need to say."

Paul, Dermot and Danny-boy looked at Marcus. He stared back, his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. A gig's a gig, even if they had to pay to do it. He felt heat rising around his ears.

"Er..."

Danny-boy shrugged. "What is it, Marcus?"

Marcus squirmed under the gaze of three pairs of eyes. Happy, excited eyes. It was another gig, after all. "Er..."

"Yeah, what is it, mate?" Dermot leant forward quizzically.

"Er..."

### ♪

"You didn't do it, did you now, Marcus?"

Rose pouted at him across the bar, hands on her hips, laughter in her eyes. He shuffled uncomfortably from foot to foot, half-grimacing, half-grinning. Her mock incredulity invoked a childish feeling of guilty pleasure that he had been in some way very naughty.

With the rehearsal completed, Corduroy Peach had settled on the idea of a swift half. At Marcus' suggestion they drove to The Flowing Well.

Being a Monday night, the small stage in the corner was set up with a microphone, a PA and a swarthy-looking man strumming his way through Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower". Punters crowded the bar, armed with all manner of musical instruments, hoping for their turn at the open-mic. Near one window, Marcus saw someone holding a set of bagpipes. At least, they looked like bagpipes. Thankfully the man was not wearing a kilt. Paul, Dermot and Danny-boy stood a little distance from Marcus and Rose, watching the "singer" on stage.

But the boys were probably not far enough away to be out of earshot.

"Shhh," Marcus hissed, shaking his head and gesturing with his eyes at the rest of the band. Rose grinned and leant forwards on the bar.

"I'm getting the impression you're basically a big girl's blouse, Mr. Mason."

"Danny-boy's gone and got us a gig," Marcus whispered, peering nervously back over his shoulder in case the others should hear. "I can't let them down."

"Oh, you're just the nicest man, aren't you? It's simply not true what people say about you. So you've decided your man Danny-boy is not such a loser after all?"

"Well, he has got us another gig, so fair play to him. He's good at that sort of thing, organizing the band, getting gigs. It's just, well, he's a bit of a bell-end, that's all."

"Yeah, that and he can't sing. Perhaps you can persuade him to be the band's manager and get someone else in to do the vocals?"

Marcus snorted. "Nah, it's his band. He wouldn't want someone else being the front man. They might not do what they were told, you know what I mean?"

Behind them, a great Dylan track was finally murdered to a smattering of halfhearted applause and a few ironic whoops.

Marcus felt Dermot's hand slap on his shoulder. "Come on, Marcus, mate, where's those drinks?"

Marcus turned sharply. Bugger, they'd all come over.

Rose cast an eye around the band. Marcus noticed her gaze linger on Dermot. "So, are you going to introduce me to the band then, Marcus?"

"Oh, er, yes. Everyone, this is Rose. Rose, this is Danny-boy, Paul and Dermot."

Dermot smiled, a warm, welcoming, confident grin. "Hi."

Paul started swaying from side to side at a fairly slow tempo while Danny-boy just blushed. Rose was quite fit.

She rested her elbows on the bar, cupping her chin in her hands. "So, are you boys going to get up and play tonight then?"

Marcus, Dermot and Paul all looked at Danny-boy. He turned a slightly deeper shade of pink.

"Er, I don't happen to have my guitar with me."

Rose smiled. "Ah, don't worry about that. You can borrow somebody's. Everyone's always doing it. Talk to your man Jim-Bob over there, he's the *compere*. He'll sort you out."

Rose pointed to a young man sitting near the stage, deep in discussion with a lady holding a trombone. He fingered a pad of paper on the table in front of him.

Danny-boy squirmed. "Well, maybe."

"Come on, mate, let's do it."

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