

A landscape photograph featuring a vibrant rainbow in the sky, arching over a flat, arid plain. In the background, a prominent mesa or plateau is visible, illuminated by warm, golden light, likely from a low sun. The foreground is filled with sparse, dry vegetation, including tall grasses and shrubs.

# The CO-OP CONSPIRACY

**A Novel**

**JOHN CURL**

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**JOHN CURL**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Waves of heat writhed slowly up from the blistering grey sand of the industrial park. Jesse and Tochtli sat on a 12x12 timber in the shade of the overhanging tin roof, along with the other workers. The rear fence was piled high with tumbleweeds.

Jesse pushed his right ear with the heel of his hand. "I can still hear that belt-sander." A red and white bandanna crossed his forehead, tied in back.

Tochtli sipped bitter, black coffee from a paper cup. "Lost your earplugs?"

"They don't work for me; that screeching cuts right through them," Jesse said gruffly. "Don't it do that to you?"

"It used to bother me more than now. I'm already half deaf."

A big panel truck rumbled past, kicking sand and throwing pebbles.

Jesse squinted at the glare of the sun on the sand. "They worked us right through the morning again without a break."

"Ralph must have forgot." Tochtli cracked a smile. He took a bite of the taco from the food truck. A thin layer of sawdust on his face traced the outline where his dust mask had been.

Lorenzo, a broad-chested journeyman sitting about six feet down the timber, lifted an apple from his lunch pail and wiped it on his glue-stained apron. "Sure they give you a break: break your arm or break your back." He spit a short laugh, then took a chomp of apple. The last joint of his ring finger was missing.

Tochtli laughed. "Lorencito, *dígame algo*: you been here a long time, right?"

Lorenzo glanced at Hector, another benchman, sitting next



to him. "Too long."

A gray-green lizard poked out from under a tie, rolled one eye, swished its ridged tail, then with a jerk disappeared beneath the lumber pile again.

"How come the guys put up with this shit? We're supposed to get a break in the morning and a break in the afternoon, right? But most of the time don't we get no break."

Lorenzo shrugged. "They got to get the work done."

"It's only ten fucking minutes."

"Just the way it is."

"That's bullshit, and everybody knows it."

"You got a choice," Hector cut in. "Bullshit or cow shit, whichever you like best."

"I got a idea," Tochtli said. "When it's break time, let's not wait for the buzzer to sound or for Ralph to say something, let's just walk off and take our break. We got it coming."

Lorenzo looked over at Jesse. "Your friend is *demente*."

"What?"

"*Loco*. Don't pay no attention to him. He's going to get you in trouble."

"What can they do?" Tochtli went on. "They got to get those contracts out. They need us. They can't fire us all." A thin scar slashed across his left cheek.

Lorenzo shrugged. "Relax, Tochtli. You're going to die, just like the rest of us."

The desert stretched out beyond the industrial park: low tough shrubs, lizards and tumbleweeds for several hundred yards, up to the suddenly-lush strip along the river bank. Jesse gazed into the distance at the streaky purple haze and swirl of a small fast-moving desert storm.

"At least it's Friday," Jesse said. "Downhill from here."

Tochtli flicked open his knife, slowly cut the peel off an

orange into a long spiral, broke open the core and offered Jesse some crescents. “That stuff you were telling me about the other day, about that co-op stuff, was that just bullshit?”

“No. My girlfriend works there. Not in the woodshop, in the same building. It’s in a big warehouse, with all kinds of cooperatives in it, down in the old industrial district. I was there. Their woodshop’s a lot smaller than this one, but they got everything they need. The machines are old, but they work. And the shop’s a lot cleaner than this place.”

“Hell,” Lorenzo interjected, “my toilet at home is a lot cleaner than this place.”

“Where my girlfriend works,” Jesse went on, “they distribute vegetables and fruits, and groceries too, to all these little co-op stores around town. Their main thing is vegetables.”

“And they got no boss? It’s all just the workers running everything?”

“That’s right.”

“So why are you still here? Why ain’t you working over there?” Tochtli asked.

“I tried to get in, but they’re full up.”

The five-minute buzzer sounded. Lorenzo stood and stretched. “*Regresar al infierno.*”

One by one and two by two, all the guys reluctantly finished lunch, drifted back into the shop through the open truck door.

Ralph, the foreman, leaned against the corrugated sheet metal wall by the entrance, a finishing nail between his teeth. Ralph mostly hung out by the plywood rack at the far end of the shop, but periodically moseyed about, usually looking for faults. As they passed him, Tochtli asked, “Mr. Ralph, how come we missed our break this morning?”

Ralph tilted his head, raised an eyebrow. “Am I hearing you right?” He had some hearing loss, which he strategically exaggerated.

“Our morning break, we didn’t get it.”

“You got a attitude. Back to sanding.” He turned to Jesse. “You’re on cutting.”

Jesse’s first months at the factory had been tough. He was kept sanding full-time. His face was continually in a cloud of dust. His mask helped some, but it quickly became so encrusted that the air mostly came in around the sides, and the dust with it. His nose was constantly clogged and his sense of smell dimmed. The shop had a dust-collection system but it was hopelessly insufficient. Bending over boxes and cabinets for hours at a stretch put terrible kinks into his neck and back. By the end of each day he was so arm-weary that he could barely hold back his belt-sander from breaking loose and taking off across the wood frame by itself. It was a relief now that Ralph was starting to move him to less-strenuous operations. Although the foreman gave him hard and dirty jobs, Jesse couldn’t help but notice that the Chicanos got the hardest and dirtiest jobs, and Ralph came down roughest on them. There were just three other Anglo workers in the shop besides him, and they got the plum jobs. Though he wasn’t really Anglo, that’s what they called him in the Southwest.

Jesse stood at the cut-off saw, stationed against one wall of the high-ceilinged room. The heat was brutal. He had hundreds of pieces to cut out of three-quarter by two inch basswood, listed on a series of cut sheets. Carefully set the stop to the thirty-second of an inch. Wiped his goggles but he couldn’t wipe off the scratches. Cut a test piece. A fraction off. He tapped the stop with his hammer then tested again. On the button. Checked for square. Cut the piece, move the stock, do it again. He repeated the process over and over. Jesse glanced at the clock, but the hands didn’t seem to move. Above the clock was a long plate glass window stretching the length of the upper floor office, from where Mr. Jagen, the bookkeeper, or whatever he was, peered down on the shop floor. From the corner of his eye Jesse watched Jagen watching them. There was something creepy about him. Jagen had no direct interaction with the

workers, but Jesse felt that he always watching, even when you couldn't see him up there.

Almost two-twenty. Jesse was very tired, shoulders and back ached, wondered how he would get through the rest of the day, watched the second hand move slowly around. It felt interminable.

"Are you here to daydream or to work?" Jesse grimaced at Ralph's petulant voice. Tension set like concrete in the pit of his stomach.

But Jesse didn't turn around. He took the bench brush, swept some dust and chips off the table, moved the narrow boards methodically along the fence, against the stop with his left hand, then with his right hand pulled the great whirling carbide blade whistling down and through the wood, let it lift above the fence, removed the cut off piece with his left hand and stacked it nearby on the table. Moving the stock down again, he repeated the process over and over. Even though this was one of the better jobs, he wished he could be anywhere in the world but here, and felt sorry for himself.

Suddenly Jesse felt a thump on his hand. He'd pulled the blade too soon, before his finger had gotten out of the way, and sliced some flesh off the side of his left thumb. He stood there staring at it a moment unbelieving. Then all at once the flesh began to ooze blood. He groped with his other hand and pulled his red and white patterned bandanna off his forehead, and wrapped it tightly around his thumb. In an instant the white areas of the fabric blended with the red. He pushed his goggles up on his forehead and glanced around the shop. Ralph was across the room, no one had seen. He felt nauseous and faint. *I could be stuck in a room like this for the next twenty years.* The saw was still whirling. He took a deep breath. *I can't afford to lose this job.* He pulled off the bandanna and looked at his hand. It wasn't gushing. He wrapped the fabric around it again, wound some masking tape tight around the bandanna, and went back to work.

Ralph strolled toward Tochtli down the aisle. Tochtli stopped, pulled off his dustmask. “It’s past 2:30, but the buzzer didn’t sound. Can we take our break soon?”

The foreman blinked. “Let me get this straight. Who am I speaking to? The fucking king of Mexico?”

“We’re supposed to get a break.”

Ralph sniggered. “Think you’re so damn entitled, don’t you?”

“I’m just asking for what’s coming to us.”

“Maybe next week.” He sauntered away, shaking his head.

Tochtli laid down his sander, said in a loud voice, “I’m taking my break.”

The machines suddenly stopped, an eerie silence filled the factory.

Tochtli turned to the group, and said, “I’m taking my break. Anybody else coming?” He shook off some dust.

Nobody else moved.

Jesse felt frozen. *Why am I so powerless?* The image of his father flashed into his mind, muttering, “*I never planned to be a refinery worker, just kind of got stuck there when you and your sisters were born.*”

Almost in spite of himself, Jesse took off his goggles, laid them on the bench. He said nothing, but walked up to Tochtli, looked him in the eye and stood beside him.

Then the two of them started toward the open truck door.

Ralph stopped them both. “Where the fuck are you two going?”

Jesse said, “We’re just taking our 2:30 break.”

“Back to work,” Ralph yelled. “That’s an order.”

Jesse hesitated.

Tochtli said in a loud voice, “Break time. Everybody, c’mon. ¡Vámanos!”

Lorenzo, at the table saw, echoed, "Break time!" He started toward the truck door. One by one the others walked toward them, until only a few workers still stood at their stations.

As the other workers approached, Tochtli and Jesse stepped past Ralph, and continued out the door, followed by the others, leaving him standing there fuming.

Outside, a casual chatter broke out among the workers, as if nothing unusual was taking place.

Ten minutes later the buzzer sounded and they came back inside. Ralph was holed back up in his lair at the far end of the shop, sitting on his high barstool, glaring at them.

The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully.

Finally the buzzer sounded again, ending the work day.

In the parking lot as they dispersed, Lorenzo said to Tochtli, "Me and Hector are going over to La Última. You want to come talk?"

Tochtli nudged Jesse with his elbow. "You coming?"

• • •

The four were sitting in a cushioned booth by a checkerboard curtained window, drinking beer. Out the window, a scattered herd of flat-bellied clouds hovered over a peak to the north-east. On the wall above them was a bullfight scene painted on black velvet. Two guys with cues in hand stalked about a coin-operated pool table near the bar. A light norteño tune jingled from the jukebox speakers, punctuated by haphazard laughter and clinking balls.

Jesse said, "That was great. It actually worked."

Tochtli sprinkled salt on the lip of his bottle, "It only works when everybody sticks together." He still had some sawdust in his thick black hair.

"Not everybody stuck together." Lorenzo scratched his chin.

“Almost everybody.”

None of the other Anglos in the shop had joined in the break.

“We’ll find out how good it worked when we come back Monday.”

“What happened to your thumb?”

Jesse’s finger throbbed, it was still tied tightly in the bandanna. “I cut it on the saw, right before we took our break.” He unwrapped the makeshift bandage. Small drops of blood oozed from the wound.

“You better have that taken care of,” Hector said.

“It’ll be OK.” He wrapped it back up, tucked in into his palm, and clenched a solid fist around it.

“That’s why guys keep getting hurt,” Tochtli said. “When they work us without no break, you get so tired you can’t see straight.”

“We shouldn’t put up with no more speedup,” Lorenzo said.

“Or forced overtime,” Jesse added.

“I need the overtime,” Lorenzo said, “to pay my bills.”

“Stop dropping all those babies all over,” Hector said, “and you wouldn’t have so much child support.”

Jesse sucked on a piece of lime, took a swig of beer. “If they want us to work overtime, they should be paying us time and a half.”

Tochtli added, “And they should get a real dust collection system. That thing don’t work for shit.”

“It ain’t up to code,” Hector said.

“Code? Don’t make me laugh. There’s enough violations,” Lorenzo said, “to shut down that factory ten times over.”

“How come nobody reports them?” Jesse put in.

“To who? It wouldn’t do no good. Those inspectors just hang out in the office. They’re on the take.”

"The worst for me," Tochtli said, "is that I like to work. I could do really good work if they let me. That's the worst for me. I'm so fucking sick of sanding those shitty army footlockers. I wish to hell I could come in early some morning and play around with those machines, make something really good."

"There's not a guy in the place who wouldn't want to do that," Hector added, "make something for his family."

"Once I asked Ralph if I could do that," Lorenzo said. "He just looked at me like I was nuts."

"We should form a union," Jesse jumped in. "My dad was a union guy. He used to tell me stories about it all the time. If we had a union we could have more say, and get some of our rights."

"Don't say that word *union* too loud," Hector replied. "That's a bad word in this town. They don't allow no *sindicatos* around here."

"I heard this used to be a union town," Tochtli said. "Long time ago. What happened?"

"What do you think? They busted them." Hector shook his head. "I got a family. I got to keep this job. I can't get involved with nothing like unions."

Lorenzo elbowed Tochtli. "Don't pay no attention to Hector, he's just testing you. Hector is fearless."

"Nobody would lose their job," Tochtli went on. "They got deadlines. That's why they got us doing all this forced overtime. They can't find enough guys to do the work. They need us. And if we do get fired, then we all get together like Jesse's been saying, get together and start our own shop. Our own cooperative shop. Then we'd be the competition, do better work, and put these suckers out of business."

"It's not that easy," Hector said. "It's expensive to start a shop."

"I'm in. Let's do it," Lorenzo replied.

"You think I'm joking, but I'm serious," Tochtli said.



“So am I. Then we give that asshole Ralph a good kick in his *pinche* butt.”

Hector rolled his eyes. “Where the fuck did they find that *payaso*? Ralph’s the worst foreman I ever seen. He don’t know shit. Nobody’s ever seen him actually do any woodworking. He got no skill, except to tell everybody what they’re doing wrong.”

“I’ll tell you why they made him foreman,” Tochtli replied. “Cause he’s a racist, *pendejo*, mother fucker.”

Hector held up an index finger. “He just takes orders from *número uno*, number one.”

“Who’s that?”

“Mr Jagen.”

“That’s what I can’t figure out,” Jesse said. “Who’s really running that place? Whenever something comes up, Ralph scurries upstairs and talks to Jagen. Why him and not the manager? I thought Jagen’s just supposed to be the bookkeeper.”

“He’s got to be more than that,” Tochtli said. “The manager’s never around. Jagen’s in charge.”

“Something’s sure weird about that guy.” Lorenzo put in. “I can’t put my finger on it, but I can smell it.”

“He’s a *chupacabra*,” Hector said. “One day he was out in back pissing on a cactus, I seen the spines sticking out of the back of his shirt, and his little pointy dick.”

After a few more beers Hector and Lorenzo went off to shoot pool.

Tochtli polished off his bottle, licked his lips. “Man, I’m no quitter, but to tell you the truth, I’m starting to get real discouraged. This is the fourth town I tried since I got back from that filthy fucking war. Spent the last sixteen months running around like a chicken without a head all over the Southwest looking for a steady job before I landed in this hellhole. How about you?”

Jesse shrugged. "Me and my girlfriend, we just kind of got stranded here. On our way to the coast last year from Boston when our transmission blew. She grew up here. I come from around Worcester, Mass. I think I told you that."

"I'm staying with my uncle, he's OK but the situation is shit. They got a huge family. His wife's mama is living with them too. I got to get out of there. If you run into a cheap room somewhere, throw it my way."

"Actually, we might have a room to rent in our house. So far it's just me and my girlfriend and an old friend of hers from high school. We've got an extra room. We been trying to avoid having to rent it out, but we need more cash coming in."

"What's the rent?"

"We haven't decided yet. Not a lot. Come over and I'll show you."

A half hour later, they were at Jesse's door, one side of a duplex.

"Tochtli works with me. He wants to look at the room."

Zelia was chopping onions in the kitchen. "We haven't made a decision about renting out that room yet." Her wavy hair was still wet from her shower; clear dark eyes, complexion almost amber.

"It's just a junk pile now, we're not using it," Jesse said. "We need the money, we should rent it out."

She needed to be firm with him. "We haven't decided to take another roommate."

"Since Tochtli's here, let's show it to him."

The room's only windows faced the driveway, but there were a couple of spreading poplar trees across the way.

"This could work for me," Tochtli said. "I been staying with my uncle, and it's getting hairy. No big deal, just too crowded. I'm trying to get settled here. I only been in town a few months. Jesse told me you work at some kind of co-op."

Hearing voices, Tracy ruffled her hair and bounced into the room. “Tracy here’s our other roommate,” Zelia said. “She and I both work at different cooperatives, but they’re also connected.”

“Zelia’s in the Food Warehouse,” Tracy said. “I’m in Community Bakery. We’re part of a whole Co-op Network.” Full lips, a narrow, square chin, a well-defined bridge on her delicate nose.

“What’s it like working at a cooperative?” Tochtli asked. “I never worked in a co-op.”

“Sometimes it’s great, sometimes it’s just a job.”

“And you got no boss?”

“Everybody’s boss,” Zelia said. “It more or less works out.”

“Sometimes more,” Tracy put in, “sometimes less.”

“And with no boss you still get some work done?”

“It’s not chaos,” Zelia responded. “In the Warehouse we have work managers, rotate jobs to some extent, try to fit people in what they do best. We have different people in charge of different operations.”

“In the bakery we all take turns being floor manager,” Tracy added. “Well, not everybody, some people don’t want the job.”

“And everybody gets along OK?”

“There’s conflicts, like anywhere else,” Tracy responded. “We resolve them.”

“How did you start doing woodworking?” Zelia asked him.

“Actually this is my first woodworking job. I’ve done construction most of my life. Closest work I ever done before this was in a counter-top factory a few years ago. How about you, Jesse?”

“I was a carpenter’s helper back in Mass, built some storage cabinets in a barn.”

“Do you have family around here?” Tracy asked.

“Arizona. Down south, Secunia County,” Tochtli answered.

“My wife's still back there, two little girls.”

Zelia noticed that he wasn't wearing a ring.

“Jesse said you're from Boston,” Tochtli said to Zelia, “but you don't sound Boston.”

“Jesse and I met there, but I grew up around here.”

“Oh yeah, he told me that, but I forgot.”

“This town was really different then. I was gone eleven years.”

“I think I told you the sad tale,” Jesse said. “We were driving to L.A., just passing through, only going to stay a few days, when the car blew, our money ran out, and everything else fell apart, so we decided to hunker down here for a while.”

“We didn't decide anything,” she corrected, “it just happened. And at this rate we'll never get to L.A.”

“We'll get there some day,” Jesse said.

After an hour talking about many things, Zelia asked Tochtli, “So, are you seriously interested in the room?”

“I'd move in tomorrow.”

“Do you cook?” Tracy asked.

Tochtli laughed. “My *mamacita* taught me how to roll a mean tamal.”

Zelia said, “Then I guess it's all right with me. What do you say, Tracy?”

Tracy gazed at Tochtli. “Looks like you're in.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Jesse couldn't sleep. He reached over and slipped his hand between Zelia's thighs.

"Are you awake?" He licked her ear.

"Stop it, that tickles."

He whispered, "Play with it, cookie."

"With what?" she said feebly.

"The feeling. Play with the feeling." He eased her legs apart, traced her chin and neck with his tongue then slid slowly down, lingering at each place, kissing her navel, along the center of her belly, nuzzling the soft skin. He lounged in her sweetness for a few minutes. They both shut their eyes and slipped into each others' minds. She made a slight upward thrust, and he responded, entering her so slow and deep she felt the movement would never end.

They had such a seesaw relationship, close one day and estranged the next. Sometimes it seemed to her they had some deep misunderstanding she could never quite put her finger on. They often seemed to speak past each other. Maybe it was something irreducible, like gender. Or ethnic differences. Or maybe they were simply not compatible. Two years before, when they first started seeing each other back in Boston, both agreed that neither was ready for anything too serious and they would keep things light, but be honest with each other. Now so much had passed between them that it felt anything but light.

"What time is it?" she asked suddenly.

"I have no idea." He kept kissing the nape of her neck.

Half-heartedly she said, "Jesse, stop it, that's enough."

A rap on the door. Tracy's voice, "Are you almost ready? We

have to go.”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Zelia called out. The clock had fallen on its back, she turned it over. “Tracy and I are both on early shift. I’m late.” She pushed his leg away and, in one motion, was sitting on the edge of the bed, grabbing her overalls.

He rolled onto his stomach, face in the pillow, considered trying to catch a few more winks, then thought better of it, and watched her dress.

She stared into the mirror, ran a brush through her hair. “You better get up too,” she said. “Aren’t you and Tochtli driving to work together this morning?”

Over the weekend, Tochtli had moved in.

Jesse shook off the cobwebs. “Right, I better get moving.” He stood, stretched, pulled on his pants.

She kissed his forehead. “See you tonight.”

• • •

Tochtli drove his old pickup, with Jesse riding shotgun, into the industrial park. The foreman stood at the truck door entrance, next to a big flatbed. That was unusual for Ralph, who ordinarily hung back by the plywood racks. Tochtli parked in the gravel by the wire link fence, and the two joined the stream of workers heading toward the door.

Ralph motioned them both over. To Jesse he said, “Wait over by the stairs.” He paused until Jesse was gone, then spat at Tochtli, “We don’t need you no more.”

“You’re laying me off?”

“Now get the fuck off this property.”

Jesse stood at the base of the open stairway leading to the office, watching Tochtli and Ralph talking, then glanced up at the office window overlooking the shop floor, and saw Mr Jagen

watching too. When Jesse looked back, Tochtli was gone.

Ralph slowly approached. “You’re on installation today, MacConnail. Work with Bob. He’s waiting for you in the finishing room to load up.”

“What happened to Tochtli?”

“Time to wise up. Bob’ll give you a ride home. Bet you’re relieved getting some distance on them greasers, eh?”

“What?”

“Oil and water. You know what I’m saying, no need to play dumb.”

Jesse was startled by Ralph’s starkness, though he probably shouldn’t have been, and when the words sank in, something in him seethed, fueled by all the painful bigotry of his childhood. But Jesse clamped down on his emotions, and just glared at Ralph. He had promised himself and Zelia he would change, control his volatility and not lose it as he had done many times in the past. He slouched toward the finishing room.

It was the most unpleasant place in the shop, booths filled with thick chemical fumes and mists that, despite the masks, made the workers, all Chicanos, constantly sick.

The back truck door was open. Bob, in a faded blue denim shirt, leaned against a large flatbed. “Looks like today’s your lucky day, MacConnail.”

They loaded the truck full of army lockers, tied it down, started slowly along the road. Bob drove with one hand, elbow out the window, country music blaring. “Ralph must like your ass. Best job in the shop. Only good one for my money. Play your cards right and you’ll be doing this all the time. Driving around’s just a lark, we get ahead of schedule, I know all the best truck stops, mighty fine cafés, always steal time with the waitresses.”

They drove toward the mountain. Bob turned off at a sign that read Restricted Official Use Only, down a winding road, stopped at a gate manned by two guards, an emblem on their

military uniforms and on the booth that Jesse didn't recognize, with no further indication of the military branch. Bob exchanged pleasantries with them, flashed some papers, and they waved them through.

"Where are we?"

"Where do you think?"

"I've heard that these mountains are hollowed out military bases."

"This one ain't quite official military. What they call contractors."

They pulled up to the back of a large building with no windows. Many shipping containers lined the parking lot; several men in drab uniforms unloaded the lockers into a container.

"Where are these going?"

"Who the fuck knows? All over the world."

On the way back, they pulled into a truck stop.

"My treat." Bob nodded to the waitress as they entered, and she winked and smiled back.

"The usual?" In her mid-thirties, lipstick drawn outside the lines of her lips.

"Daisy, this is my friend Jesse. Give him anything he wants. On my account."

As they ate, Bob chattered on about this and that.

"It's called pork barrel, champ. Give contracts to us, places like us, just to keep things going. Lucky we got them."

"Can't they get lockers cheaper from China or some place," Jesse said, "like they get everything else?"

"Sure, they can get any stuff cheaper from China or India or Bangladesh or wherever, but there's no more economy in this country anymore but military. All the poor folks with no jobs make this place a powder keg. All it needs is something to set it off. As you well know, the old industrial district's a ghost town,



mostly abandoned and shuttered. The only serious industries left are funded by military. They don't even need half the garbage. Just pump it out to keep things going, send it overseas somewhere, dump it or blow it up, and start again. If they were to take this away too, people would be burning down city hall."

"From what I've seen in the news, there's a few cities where they've already done that."

Bob leaned in and spoke in a low tone, "You got a record?"

Jesse was taken aback. "What kind?"

"You know what I mean. I used to have a record longer than a rhino's dick, but look at me now. Clean as a dog whistle. You know anybody who needs his record cleaned up, I could tell him how."

"What's the secret?"

Bob leaned in. "Friends. Got friends who can do that. That's how the world works, if you don't want to be a loser. I help you, you help me."

"Shouldn't we be getting back to the shop?"

"No rush. No prob. Wait here a few minutes, don't go nowhere, I'll be back."

He walked over to the counter and whispered to Daisy. She nodded to the other waitress. Bob and Daisy disappeared through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

Jesse started to get fidgety. They were taking a long time.

Finally Bob reappeared. He leaned into Jesse. "Your turn."

"For what?"

"What do you think? Choose whichever one you want. Sorry it's just a choice to two. Maybe they ain't the prettiest in town, but they're both real knowledgeable. If you want my advice, Daisy'll give you more bang for the buck."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"No need to be shy. It ain't even your buck. Treat's on me."

“Bob, I’m just not into this.”

• • •

Zelia was seven when an auto accident took her mother, and ten when her father married Esther, whose son, Keechee, was a year younger. The neighborhood they lived in was split into ethnic groups but, being Chicano and Navajo, their family didn’t quite fit into any. If Zelia had a Spanish surname she might have slipped into the Chicano community unnoticed despite her wavy chestnut hair, but her Austrian name Mayrhofen set her immediately apart from the others. Her Navajo brother cemented that distance. There were a number of mixed Chicano-Anglo families in her school, but they were the only family in her school that was part Navajo, and both she and Keechee were often ostracized for it. Meanwhile, her father Ricardo’s and Esther’s marriage was rocky. A wall of miscommunication drove them apart, a cultural gap they could never quite break through. After three years, Ricardo Mayrhofen and Esther Yazzie separated, got back together briefly, then finally gave up. Esther didn’t fit into Ricardo’s world nor he into hers. She moved back to her old home on the reservation, taking Keechee, while Zelia remained with Ricardo, by trade a contractor. But by that time Zelia and Keechee had a bond that continued. She missed Keechee terribly when they left, and was overjoyed now to get to know him again as an adult, and to work with him in the Co-op Food Warehouse.

Claire stopped her forklift next to Zelia’s. “Keechee’s here.”

The Food Warehouse was teeming with activity, forklifts moving crates around the floor, workers packing boxes with produce.

“I’ll take it.” Zelia backed up, turned, headed down to the receiving dock, parked near an old box truck.

“*Aa’ ha’íi, shila,*” she said.

Keechee was moving product out of the back with a jack lift. “*T’áá naashnish*. Just working, and you?”

“Same.”

“This stuff is from this new little farm out in the valley—well, new to us—but they got really beautiful squash, crookneck, straightneck, scallop, everything. Wait’ll you see them. How’s Jesse?”

“Still hates his job. Cut his finger on a saw, but it’s not too bad.”

“That place is going to kill him. Get him out of there.”

“He already tried to get into Wooden Coyote, but they didn’t have an opening.”

“How about that other woodshop in the Network? The new one?”

“I don’t know if he even went over there. He doesn’t like being rejected.”

“He gives up too easy, takes the easy way out. He’s got to be persistent. Hey, I heard the All-Worker meeting is scheduled for the 23<sup>rd</sup>. I want to come but that’s Gymma’s birthday. I told him we’d do something special.”

“All-Worker meetings are special.”

“That’s a different kind of special.”

“They asked me to be one of the facilitators. I don’t know why.”

“Because you’re good at it.”

“I’m really not.”

”In the land of the deaf, the one-eared woman is queen. What’s the agenda?”

“For one, finances.”

“Just that word makes me snore.”

“Then there’s Orphan Mountain. The petition, preparations for the blockade.”

“Of course. DZ. Then I’ve got to be there. I’ll drag Gymma along. I’ll try to bring Cayatano too.”

“They already invited him. He’s actually going to speak about it. The other sexy agenda item is about direction.”

“Again?”

“The usual. A lot of people still think the Network’s trying to be too many different things at the same time. We need more focus, almost everybody agrees about that. But, you know, as soon as we start talking about what to cut, everybody disagrees.”

“If you’re facilitator, hold tight on the reins. More rock, less shlock.”

• • •

Tracy had never worked in a bakery before this, though she knew something about baking, or so she thought. She got the job through Keechee. She knew him long ago in high school as Zelia’s brother, and now she knew him as a Network truck driver who worked for Community Bakery as well as for the Food Warehouse.

Baking was not easy but Tracy enjoyed the variety of production and sales, loved the smells, and got to chat with customers when it wasn’t too crowded. Most of all she liked the way the baking collective ran. There were twelve women and four men in the core group; three shifts so people who worked well together sorted themselves into the same shift; some were also close friends. The bakery had been owned by a couple, but when the economy collapsed, they decided to shut it down, even though it still did enough business to pay salaries, but not enough to make much of a profit. The workers just took it over. None of the machines and fixtures were worth much, but they were still paying them off.

Tracy and Barbara were working the sheeter moulder.

Barbara pressed down on each mound of dough, fed it into the rollers, flattening the dough evenly and rolling it into a tube, which Tracy caught at the other end.

“What do you think of Jack?” Barbara asked.

“Why?” Tracy laid the tubes of dough into pans.

“No reason. I think he likes you.”

“Jack likes everybody.” Tracy wheeled the pans of dough to the proof box, which controlled the temperature and humidity for the bread's second rising, and arranged them on the racks.

Later Tracy, Jack and the others, over soft music, kneaded and shaped the risen dough into large mounds. Then at the long wooden table, Jack cut each mass into yeasty-smelling chunks, which Tracy weighed and adjusted to one-and-a-half pounds each, then tossed to the other workers.

“Did I tell you my idea?” Tracy said.

“What idea?”

Her eyes appeared almost gray. “We make little flyers and put them in all the bread bags with the labels. A different flyer every day.”

He pushed back his baker's hat. His nose was slightly hooked. “Little flyers? Saying what?”

“Information.”

“About what?”

“An event. Art. A sketch. A poem. Support some cause. Support the Co-op Network. Support Orphan Mountain. Anything.”

“I like the idea,” Barbara put in. “As long as we don't get too political.”

“Why not?” Jack said. “Political is good.”

“A lot of people might get turned off and not buy our bread.”

“No they won't.”

“Some will,” Barbara insisted. “We’ve got to keep a low profile, stay under the radar.”

“We’re not under any radar,” Jack replied. “There are bad guys out there watching our every move.”

“You’re paranoid.”

Jack went on, “How about jokes? Let’s put jokes on the little flyers. Political jokes.”

“I never understand your jokes,” Tracy replied.

“And I never know when you’re joking,” Barbara said.

“You two just got no sense of humor. I never joke. Seriously, I think those labels are a good idea.”

“So do I.” Barbara turned to Tracy. “Why don’t you bring it up at the next collective meeting?”

Near the front entrance of the bakery was a counter with a cash register, a few tables and chairs, with more out on the sidewalk. People could come in off the street, buy bread and pastries, coffee or tea, and hang out. Though it made up only a small part of their business, it was important to the collective because it was their window to the world, so they didn’t feel isolated. A string of regulars, friends, and interesting people were always coming through. It was around the inside tables, after hours, that they also held their weekly meeting. Bakery meetings were informal, usually predictable: recipes, clean up, schedules, finances. They just talked things through until everybody was more or less satisfied, and rarely put anything to a vote. Sometimes it took a while and could be frustrating, but in the end they usually found some agreement that was acceptable to everybody.

After closing time, Tracy finished sweeping, grabbed a cup of chai tea and relaxed at one of the tables. Jack came over, sat down, engaged her in small talk. Then she asked him something she’d been curious about but had never approached, where he grew up.

“Oakland,,” he said. “How about you?”

“Long Island.”

“Where’s that?”

“Near New York City.”

“I grew up in Oakland, but my family’s from a little village way up in the mountains of Guatemala, called Chuwatz’ak, right in the center of Mayapan,”

“I think I know where Guatemala is, but I’m not sure. You’ll have to show me on a map.”

“Just south of Mexico. You must have heard of Mayapan, it’s been in the news a lot.”

“I don’t always follow the news. I get interested in politics for a while, then I burn out. Back in the day, a lot of my family—one side—were Zionists. It was painful watching them give up on broken dreams. I guess I reacted by distancing myself from politics, my sister did too.”

“I’m not real political these days either,” he said. “Except that everybody expects me to be.”

“Why’s that?”

“The way they report about Mayapan on the news, it’s like they’re trying to keep the waters muddy. So when I tell people that my family’s from there, they’re always asking me questions, it kind of keeps me political.”

“I’d be really interested in hearing more about it, Jack.”

“Sure, but before we get any further, I got to tell you something.”

“What?”

“My name isn’t Jack.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just let everybody call me Jack because it’s easier. My name is really Chac. It’s a Mayan name, the spirit of rain.”

“Funny how we’ve been working together six months,” she said, “but I barely know you.”

“Eight months,” he corrected.

Tracy never knew her natural father, who disappeared when her mother was pregnant. But before Tracy’s second birthday, her mother, Marcia Sanders, who was second-generation Jewish-American and a veterinary technologist, married David Park, who was second-generation Korean-American and a dentist. When she was little, her family lived on Long Island, in a predominantly Jewish suburban housing development. To satisfy his parents-in-law, David converted to Judaism, but really retained his Buddhist beliefs and Confucian practices. Her family attended the most “progressive” synagogue but only on High Holy Days; she knew the Ten Commandments but not accurately. She had a younger sister, Kim. Tracy retained her mother’s maiden name, Sanders, which actually started out as Szendro, but got changed when her great grandfather Arpad came to America from the village of Nyíregyháza, Hungary, and got a job in the New York garment district in the years leading up to the Great Depression. Tracy’s immediate family got along in reasonable harmony, but there was constant friction and little communication between the two sides of her extended family. So Marcia and David decided to get as far away from them as they could and, when Tracy was ten, moved to New Mexico. When Tracy and Zelia met in high school, their ethnically mixed families became part of their bond.

• • •

Back home after work, Zelia kicked off her shoes, grabbed a glass of orange juice, unhooked her overall straps, headed to the shower, when she heard a noise.

Tochtli stuck his head out of his room.

“You startled me,” she said. “I thought I was alone.”

“Sorry.”

“Is Jesse here too?”



“No. I got fired.”

“What happened?”

“I’m too bummed to talk about it right now. I’ll tell you about it later. The weird part is, Jesse did the same shit as I did, but they just fired me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I wasn’t going to stay there long anyway. That place is the pits. Don’t worry, I got a little coin stashed to tide me over.”

“We just filled a job at the Food Warehouse. Do you have any warehouse experience?”

“I done a lot of things, but no warehouse work.”

“We don’t have any openings now anyway. But you might try one of the woodshops in the Co-op Network. There are two of them now.”

“Jesse told me about them.”

“If you’re not totally fixed on woodworking, if you’re flexible, you might also try finding a job somewhere else in the Network. Jobs are always opening up somewhere. The Food Warehouse is kind of the center. We’ve got a great bulletin board, the latest stuff, all the jobs. Come over and check it out.”

“I will.”

He was standing in the doorway to his new room as they spoke. Something colorful behind him caught Zelia’s eye. “What’s that?”

“My regalia. Want to see it?”

Dazzling clothes spread on the bed. “You’re an Aztec dancer!”

“I try.”

“You must dance with a group.”

“Used to, back in Arizona. I’m thinking of hooking up with another one around here.”

“I’d love to see you dance some day.”

Tochtli took up Danza Azteca years before, when he was still living with his wife in Arizona. He did it from instinct. Something about it drew him toward it, something beyond rationality. Maybe he was just looking for an identity, and found it there. He actually had distant family connections, but he knew almost nothing about them while he was growing up. His family lived in Tucson, and his extended family in Nogales and Hermosilla, Sonora. He had heard vague stories of how his grandmother's side originally came from much further south, from the Sierra Norte mountains near Puebla, but he never thought much about it until news began trickling in of North American military contractor units operating in that area. The central Mexican government was in such a state of collapse, at first he thought it might be a good thing, and give some stability to the region. On a visit to his grandmother in Hermosilla, he asked her about her childhood, and for the first time she spoke to him of how she grew up in the mountains behind Puebla, helping her family grow coffee on the slopes near the village of Zapacoxtla, how at home the old people spoke Náhuatl, the language of the Aztecs, as their primary tongue. She explained that she didn't know if she could still understand it, it had been so long ago, but she expected that she still had many friends and relatives there. And she told him she had heard that the North American military contractors were reeking destruction there in the indigenous communities and among the campesinos throughout the Sierra Norte.

• • •

Hours later, Bob dropped off Jesse at the house.

"Anybody else fired?" Tochtli asked.

"Not that I heard," Jesse replied. "And they gave everybody both morning and afternoon breaks. So it worked."

"So suddenly Ralph's playing Mr Niceguy."

"Yep. Everybody thinks you're a hero."

“Yeah, a dead hero,” Tochtli mumbled. “But Ralph didn’t give you no shit about it? Nothing? After you walked out right behind me, troublemaker number two.”

“Nothing. I don’t know why. He put me on installation. I was driving around with Bob all day, so I wasn’t in the shop much. I heard about the breaks from Lorenzo.”

“Fire me and give you a cushy job.” Tochtli shook his head. “It’s cause you’re a Gringo.”

Jesse felt the sting. “I’m going to quit anyway.”

Zelia, leafing through a magazine nearby, jumped in. “You can’t just quit.”

“I’ll find another job first.”

### CHAPTER THREE

Zelia climbed into bed next to Jesse, let her head sink into the pillow. "I think Tracy and Jack have gotten together. You remember Jack, don't you?"

Jesse was facing away, reading a book. "Yeah."

"I'm very happy for her, aren't you? She really needs somebody she can rely on."

"Sure."

"You're not listening."

"I'm listening."

"Are you even interested?"

"Great. Jack's a nice guy. I'm right in the middle of something. Let's talk later."

"That's what you always say."

"No, I don't."

"You never want to talk."

"That's not true."

"Not about anything serious."

He put the book down. "What do you want to talk about?"

She hesitated. "Are you happy?"

"Sure."

"Don't just give me that bobble head. Are you happy?"

"Is anybody ever really happy? What is happiness?"

"If you're happy, you know it."

"Some know it, some don't. How about you?"

She made a face. "No, I'm not happy."

“What would make you happy?”

“I don’t know. Not this.”

“Not what?”

“I can’t live like this the rest of my life. I want a family,” she blurted.

“Let’s not have another all-nighter.”

“I’m sorry to be such an inconvenience, but I have feelings too.”

“We’ve been through this a million times.”

“Maybe you don’t want to be with a woman.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Most women would feel this way.”

“Talk about you and me.”

“We’re always just kind of a couple.”

“Meaning what?”

“I want something realer.”

“But not with me.”

“With you, if that’s possible. Why are we together?”

“Maybe because we care about each other.”

“I care for you, Jesse, I do. And I know you care about me. Sometimes. But we’re going nowhere.”

“Where do you want to go?”

She threw back the covers and stood. “You’re impossible.”

“Where are you going?”

“For a walk.”

“At this time of night?”

She dressed and left. Jesse wanted to follow her, but didn’t.

It was true, he didn’t know what he wanted. He loved her in moments of passion. And there was also a quiet kind of love, just being together. But how much did he miss her, long for her

when they were apart? They had broken up for a few months in Boston, and each of them had seen other people. Knowing that Zelia was with another man hurt more than Jesse ever expected. But did that hurt actually have much to do with her and him, or was it some ancient biological ritual they were acting out? Jesse thought of the girl he dated briefly while he and Zelia were separated. He'd never quite been able to get Becky off his mind, they felt so good together at first, before it quickly fell apart. Was he even capable of deep, lasting love?

A half hour later, Zelia was back.

"I'm going to sleep on the couch," she said.

"So you don't want to sleep with me?"

"I feel lost. We need to get perspective. I need a little distance."

"We did that back in Boston, and it was so much fun that now you want to do it again."

"That was something you wanted to do, not me."

"And now the tables have turned."

"It's not like that."

"You want to see other people?"

"I just can't continue the way things are." She hesitated, then whispered, "You don't love me."

"That's not true."

"I have to force you to say it."

"It's the truth, I love you." Then he added, "Most of the time."

Neither spoke for a moment. Then she said quietly, "I'll move out."

"No. I'll find another place."

"Just for a while."

• • •

“I’ve got about an hour before my shift,” Zelia said to Tochtli, as they walked up the metal stairs to the dock.

Tochtli looked around the busy Food Warehouse, high ceilings, skylights, exposed roof trusses. A group of workers moving vegetables, fruits, and cheeses from large totes and repacking them into smaller boxes and cartons. “These are for buying clubs,” she explained. “Almost every day different clubs come here to pick up their boxes. What’s in the boxes depends on the harvest, what’s coming in from the farms. What do you know about the Co-op Network?”

“Only what I been hearing from you guys. And that little co-op store we went to yesterday with all those good vegetables.”

“There are six other co-op stores in town. Most of them are little storefronts, like the one you saw. Two of them are bigger. Veggies are a Network specialty.”

Zelia saw Jimmy working on the floor, and introduced Tochtli. “Jimmy is our resident storehouse of information and historian. He can explain the Network better than me.”

“We call this building Network Central,” Jimmy began. “It’s shared by a group of collectives. The Food Warehouse takes up about half of the building, and the rest is shared by the woodshop, print shop, electronics, garage, quilting, bakery around the corner. What did I leave out? Trucking. And the Tech Collective. Each collective is separate, but we’re also connected. All different sizes, some just a handful of people. Two of the Network stores, which are scattered around town, have over forty working members each, plus all the volunteers. And we’re growing. Low tech, high tech. Almost anything you can imagine. And if you don’t have cash, you can usually barter. Some of the connections among the different cooperatives are loose, some more formal. Mechanics, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, welders, potters, silversmiths, artists, designers, bookstores, restaurants, cafes, theater, taxis, farmers markets, community gardens, I probably left out a few. Altogether, the

Network has over fifty cooperatives and collectives in the loop. Most of them are scattered around town, but there are also others in the region, small farms, ranches, out on the reservations, in the pueblos.”

Tochtli said, “I been living here for six months, and I never knew about this.”

“It’s easy to miss us if you’re not connected. We keep a low profile. We’re mostly invisible as far as the media are concerned.”

“How’d this all come together?”

“It’s a long story. For the most part, people came together and formed the Network piece by piece because there’s no future in working for the corporate oligarchy.”

“Jimmy’s also one of our resident ideologues.”

“Strictly a rank amateur.”

Zelia showed Tochtli the storage areas, temperature control coolers, break-bulk department, order pulling. “Nobody works only in the office. Everybody takes shifts on the floor. We’ve got a system of rotating floor managers, change every three months. There are a few specialty jobs, like bookkeeper, a job which nobody wants but somebody’s always stuck with, really more like a check signer than a bookkeeper, since the books are a little rough.”

As they walked around, Zelia exchanged small talk with many of the workers, an assortment of race, ethnos, gender, age, and introduced Tochtli; everyone seemed to be working hard, focused but relaxed, having a reasonably good time.

“And everybody makes a living off of this?”

“We keep afloat.”

“It must be fun to work here.

“It can be fun, but you’ve also got to work. You know, like any place that people gather, it’s the old human comedy. Almost always a sit-com, if you can keep your sense of humor.”



Zelia stopped in an open space in front of the office. “When there’s an All-Worker Network meeting, this is where we hold it. Clear off all the pallets, open up a bigger space. Actually there are two offices. The left door is the Network office, and the right door is the Food Warehouse office. Let’s see if Glori or somebody is in the Network office.” She tapped on the left door to no response. “I guess nobody’s there.”

“Who’s Glori?”

“She’s the Network coordinator, kind of the staff person. Jimmy who you just met also works part time with her. The two of them and two other people take care of Network business between All-Worker meetings. We call them the coordination committee. Glori’s also in the quilting and sewing cooperative. The Network doesn’t really have a leader, but she’s about as close as anybody. She knows a lot, she’s very level-headed. We depend on her for our sanity. I guess we’d survive without her, but it would be hard.”

Zelia looked through the glass of the Food Warehouse office door, and saw Keechee and Claire rummaging through papers. They were working on inventory control.

“Tochtli, this is Claire and my brother Keechee. Claire’s on the management team this month. When she’s not doing that, she’s usually driving a forklift like me. Keechee is our ace trucker.”

Keechee grasped Tochtli’s hand lightly in the Navajo way with only a gentle squeeze of the thumb. There was something very pure in Keechee’s smooth cheeks, slightly aquiline profile and black bristly hair.

“Zelia, I got to talk to you about something,” Claire said.

“Do you do warehouse work too, or just trucking?” Tochtli asked Keechee.

“Just trucking. We’re kind of separate, the Trucking Pool works for a number of the collectives, but mainly for the Food Warehouse. We pick up produce and other stuff from small farmers and wholesale markets, bring it here for processing,

then make deliveries to stores, dropoff terminals, sometimes to homes. Keeps us pretty busy. We got regular routes. Since we're always moving around, we're also kind of the grapevine for the system; we know what's happening in all the different sites, all the best gossip."

Claire said to Zelia, "Me and Jimmy want you working in the office more."

"I like working on the floor."

"You can still work on the floor part time. The Food Warehouse needs to use you better. You're well organized and smart. We've got to get better at what we're doing as a collective, and that involves everybody working at what they do best."

"I'm not smart," Zelia said. "Anyway, Tochtli's here looking for a job in the Network."

"What kind of work do you do?" Claire asked him.

"My last job was in a woodshop," Tochtli answered. "But I can do lots of things. I'm kind of ... What do they call it? A jack-of-all trades."

"Can you do bookkeeping?"

"No."

"Well, outside of a bookkeeper, there's nothing open in the Food Warehouse right now, and we got a big pile of interested folks. Look at the bulletin board over there, you might find a lead somewhere else in the Network."

Claire and Keechee went back to their conference.

The large bulletin board was covered with fliers and leaflets, one section reserved for jobs. Tochtli rummaged through the listing. "Here's something interesting," he said to Zelia. "The Technical Collective is looking for somebody who knows refrigeration."

"The Tech Collective knows everything about everything, almost any kind of skill," Zelia said. "When a cooperative can't

figure out something by themselves, they go to the Tech Collective. They work out of a space on the other side of the building, near the woodshop. We can swing by there. Do you know refrigeration?”

“Not really, but I pick up things real fast. Mechanical things, anything about machines. I can usually figure out almost anything mechanical on the fly.”

Zelia and Tochtli were half out the door when Keechee said. “Wait a second, I’ll go with you.”

They walked down the long hallway with doors opening into studios on both sides.

Tochtli asked, “How did all this get started?”

“The Food Warehouse or the Network?”

“Both.”

“They both started a few years ago,” Zelia said. “Keechee was involved from the beginning. He can tell you better than me.”

“It started when the economy tanked and hit bottom. At least we thought that was the bottom. After the shock wore off, a lot of folks around here realized that it wasn’t going to bounce back, jobs weren’t coming back. Most people couldn’t afford to start all over again somewhere else, and they knew things were bad all over. They couldn’t rely on the corporations or the government any more; if they were going to survive they had to do it themselves. Everybody had to help each other. Groups started forming almost all by themselves. We began communicating with each other, making connections, pulling together, until people realized that we’re becoming something bigger, a Network. It wasn’t happening just here, but similar stuff was happening in a lot of other places too.”

“How did you get this building?”

“This whole industrial area was pretty much shut down, full of empty buildings. We just broke in through a window and took over,” Keechee said. “We squatted it.”

“The city let you?”

“We had to fight them every step of the way. The old building owner was bankrupt, fled to the Cayman Islands or some place. The banks didn’t want it, it was a mess, run down, falling apart, a big liability, owed more than it was worth just in back taxes. Lots of buildings around here were in limbo like that, and a lot still are. The city took it for tax default. They were going to raze it. Then we just came in one night and squatted it. The city didn’t even know we were here for a long time. Cleaned it up, fixed stuff, and put it to use. When the city found out, they ordered us to shut down. We refused. There were confrontations. Finally somebody working for the city screwed his head on right and realized that they would be better off letting us have it, and we worked it out. We’re not the only one. You’d never know from the outside, but there are squats in a number of other industrial buildings around here too. From the outside they look empty, abandoned, but inside there’s all kinds of stuff going on. Some the city knows about, some it don’t.”

At a fork in the hallway, Keechee broke off and returned to the loading dock, while Zelia and Tochtli continued down the hall.

They peeked into Patchwork Sewing and Quilting Studio. Beautiful fabrics hung on the walls, two women working at different ends of a large quilt, and a man sewing seams on a shirt.

“Sorry to bother you,” Zelia said. “This is my friend Tochtli. I was just showing him around.”

“Always glad to have visitors,” one of them, an older black woman, responded.

“This is Glori,” Zelia said, “one of bedrocks of the Network.”

“I’m just an old quilter. Are you interested in quilting?”

“I don’t know quilting,” Tochtli said. “but I sew. My mama taught me to use an old footpedal, that was the first machine I ever learned, even before cars, she always let me thread her

bobbin. Now most of my sewing is on my regalia, and I sew it all by hand.”

“Well, bring it in sometime, maybe we’ll work on it with you.”

“I’m sure I could learn a few tricks from you.”

As they progressed down the hallway, they could hear the whirr of the saws. The Wooden Coyote woodshop door was ajar, and they walked in.

“The shop is beautiful,” Tochtli said. “I’m blown away.”

Several people were working on different cabinet and furniture projects on the benches. Bruce adjusted some clamps on the go-bar deck, strolled over, chatted a little, gave him a brief tour. Tochtli explained his situation, talked about the factory.

“I’ve heard about that sweatshop,” Bruce said “An infamous hell hole. I got friends who used to work there. You should be glad you got out alive.”

“Any possibility of an opening here? I’d love to give it a shot.”

“Somebody might be leaving here, but it’s not going to happen right away. Maybe in a month. Could be longer.”

“I probably got to find something sooner.”

“Well, stay in touch, you never know.”

Further down the hall they knocked on the Technical Collective door. A young African-American woman opened it. Several benches, tools all over, machine parts, works in progress, several people busy at projects.

“I saw a notice in the office that you have an opening.”

“What can you do?” Meru asked him.

“Electrical, welding, plumbing, woodworking, any kind of construction.”

“How about refrigeration?”

“I haven’t done refrigeration, but I’m good at figuring things out, I learn fast. Man makes it, man can fix it. I’ll tackle anything.”

“We need somebody who’ll make that his specialty,” she said. “We work on a job-to-job basis. It’s usually an emergency, and they want it done yesterday. We can’t guarantee steady work, although there’s usually more than we can handle. Refrigeration isn’t as easy as it might sound. You’ll have to cram.”

“I’m your man.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

“You can stay with me at Fire House,” Keechee said.

“It’ll just be a few days,” Jesse replied. “I’ll find another room somewhere.”

“You and Zelia might be back together by then.”

Fire House, a large, old adobe originally built by an order of nuns as a half-way house for “delinquent” girls, was now a center of intertribal activities and a place to stay for activists passing through. Fire House was connected to the Co-op Network through the Intertribal Skill Exchange, which it sponsored and which had an office in the building. The Exchange facilitated barter among Native people and found jobs for them both in the Network and outside of it. There was also a Native crafts store in Fire House, run primarily by jewelry and pottery cooperatives.

Jesse threw his knapsack and sleeping bag into a corner of Keechee’s room.

“There are rolled-up mattresses in the closet. Come on, let’s see if Cayatano is here. I’ll introduce you. Cayatano’s kind of my mentor. He’s also director of Fire House. Like a CEO, but not quite.”

They entered the kitchen, where three men were talking. Conversation stopped abruptly.

“*Wóshdée,*” Cayatano said. “Come on in.” A sturdily built middle-aged man with long ears and calm, kind eyes.

“*Yá’át’ée’h shizhé’é.* Mr. Honawa, Mr. Keok, Cayatano. Sorry to disturb you. This is my friend, Jesse. I was just showing him around Fire House. Is it alright for him to stay with us for a few days?”

Honawa was also middle-aged, small and wiry, wearing a baseball cap, with long braids hanging down his shoulders, an intensity in his every feature. Keok was younger, head shaved, larger, powerful.

“Any friend of Keechee is always welcome,” Cayatano said.

• • •

From as far back as Jesse could remember, he had a feeling deep inside that there was something he was supposed to do in this world, somehow he had been given a job when he was very little. But it wasn't clear to him just what it was, as if he had forgotten the assignment and how he got it. During adolescence he flew from one thing to another, threw himself into each one with abandon but emerged crestfallen when none turned out quite right. Maybe he was wrong, he'd been deceiving himself. What if nothing was right for him in this life? When he felt like that he would go into a lethargy. Eventually he would pick himself up and move on, each time a little more disillusioned.

Maybe it was because he was an outsider as a kid. The world was divided into groups and he didn't fit into any of them. He walked around with a chip on his shoulder, always getting into fights. Trouble followed him through school. He tried to fit into their system, but he felt like a spirited colt they were trying to break, and he refused to be broken. Though he tried to keep a low profile, authority raised his hackles, and every turn seemed to bring new conflicts. One day in high school he was hurrying down the crowded stairs between classes when someone pushed him from behind. He spun, punched a boy in the face, breaking two of his teeth. No one saw anybody push him, and the boy denied it. Jesse was expelled. He started hanging around the streets, got in with a tough crowd, and wound up doing time in juvie. That sobered him up for a while. He scraped and clawed the rest of his way through high school. When he was finally finished, he decided he needed to get as far away as possible,



see the world, and found a job on an old merchant freighter sailing to Central America. The ship was hellish, they treated the crew like dirt. He decided the only way he could survive was by not taking shit from anyone, so he wound up making enemies and getting into a lot of fights. The ports were nasty; around the docks, locals saw him as fair game to be ripped off. The few times he got out into the countryside for a couple of days, he saw that things were different and a lot friendlier out there, but he also realized that he would never connect with that world as a merchant seaman.

After debarking in New York City with just a few bucks in his pocket, he soon got involved with drug dealers, hit rock bottom, and wound up doing time.

When he finally got out, he drifted back to Boston, took a room in a shared flat, found low paying, tedious jobs, tried to live as cheaply and do as little as possible. He discovered he liked to hang out in the library, which surprised him. There were only a few books in his family's home, and he never took much to them at school. Now he found that he loved old books, to hold them in his hands, leaf through them. He found a sense of security being surrounded by voices from the past. The subject didn't always matter; he skimmed many, rarely finished any. He actually preferred to leave them unfinished, so he could return like visiting an old friend. Somewhere in these old books there were answers to his questions, keys to his search.

• • •

Under the easyup canopy, Tochtli introduced Zelia to some of the Cempaxóchil dancers. They were in a park, rehearsing, surrounded by a small crowd of onlookers. He'd been to only one rehearsal before this, but he fit well into the troupe.

Tochtli ducked into a small van with some of the other dancers, then stepped out dressed in his regalia. Zelia could barely believe it was the same person. The dancers filed out and

formed a large circle. A forest of brightly colored plumes, two drummers, one with a large upright skin-stretched drum, the other with a horizontal hollow log open on top with carved tongues. A dancer in vibrant dress held up a brazier of burning copal, others shook rattles. A stream of sweet smoke twisted into the sky from the resinous incense. The lead dancer, in a shimmering green garment, faced east, the other dancers following his lead. He lifted a conch shell and blew a trumpetlike blast, the sound echoing far above. It seemed to clear a space inside Zelia's head.

The lead dancer faced each direction in turn, the other dancers turning with him, and blew the conch. The drumming began, copal smoke filled the air, the dancers stomped and swirled, jingling shells and clattering nuts strung on their leggings, plumes waving in a flying circle. Zelia felt awe-struck. She sensed a high spirituality, and felt an immediate binding with it.

Later, as they were driving home, Zelia said, "I'd like to understand it better. I've watched it since I was little, when my papi used to take me. But I've never really understood it."

"The dancers are planets, the lead dancer is the sun. It's a reflection of the spirit world. You need to dance to really understand it."

Almost without thinking, she said, "I'd like to dance. Do you think they'd let me join?"

• • •

Late at night, Jesse lay on the bedroll on the floor in Fire House. He couldn't sleep. He felt lonely, yearning for something or someone. He kept thinking about Zelia, wondering what she was doing. He wanted to call her, but restrained himself. Despite himself, he kept thinking of her with somebody else. It was painful, and he did everything he could to take his mind off it, with no success. Finally he dressed, slipped out of Fire House,

drove over to his old place, parked across the street, and looked at Zelia's dark window. No movement inside. He sat there for a long time. He couldn't shake off his pain.

Finally he drove away, turned onto the highway. He didn't pay much attention, he wasn't going anywhere, just driving. He realized as he passed a turnoff that it was where Bob had taken him to that café. Got off at the next exit, drove back and pulled into the parking lot.

"What can I get you?"

"How about a cup of coffee?"

"Aren't you Bob's friend?"

"I guess." There were only two other customers in the café, sharing a booth.

"You remember me, don't you?" she asked.

He looked at her name tag. "Sure I remember you, Daisy."

"It's really Margarita, but they call me Daisy. Just java? Get you anything more?"

"Not really, thanks."

She returned with the drink. It was thin, tasteless. The other customers disappeared out the door.

"Mind if I sit down with you? Or do you feel like being alone?"

"It's OK."

She slid next to him. "Awful lonely here at night sometimes."

"I know what you mean."

"Glad to have somebody to talk to. I always like to talk to your boss, Bob."

"He's all right. He's not my boss."

"I thought he was, from something he said. A real sweet dude, don't you think? Good tipper."

"Does he come in here a lot?"

“Couple times a week. I know he likes you a lot. He told me, be sure to always be extra nice to you, give you anything you want, put it on his tab.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Cause he’s such a nice guy.”

“He doesn’t make enough to be that generous, There’s got to be more to it than that.”

“Don’t you believe in generosity? Or are you one of those fellas who keep it all locked up and don’t give away nothing?”

“I just think Bob must want something back. I don’t know what.”

“Well, why don’t we try a little experiment.”

“How’s that?”

“You run up a tab here at the café, and maybe you’ll find out what you want to know.” She placed her hand on his thigh.

• • •

He didn’t have the energy to drive back to Fire House. Daisy asleep next to him felt so comforting. It was very late, in a few hours he had to get up and go to work. He drifted off, then shook himself awake again. He wished it hadn’t happened. The last thing he wanted was for Zelia to know about it. He wanted to be honest with her, but also keep open whatever chance they had to get back together.

As he drove slowly toward the factory, he felt so weary. Could he make it through the day? He liked being at Fire House; there was an excitement there he’d rarely felt anywhere else, but he couldn’t crash on Keechee’s floor indefinitely, and he didn’t want to overstay his welcome. He would spend the weekend looking for a new place.

He approached the industrial park. A burning stench, a thick rising black cloud, a dark red glow. He pulled through the

gate. Billowing smoke, flames shooting out of the factory roof. The area was cordoned off. Fire trucks, police, ambulance, medics. The manager and Mr Jagen with a cop jotting notes in a little pad. Jesse joined the crowd of workers, watched grimacing, while at the same time a part of him wanted to dance.

“What happened?” he asked Hector.

“Dust explosion.”

“I didn’t know that dust explodes.”

“This ain’t the first time it’s ever happened.”

“Anybody inside?”

“Ralph and Bob, from what I heard.”

Jesse saw Bob standing on the far side, and approached him. “You OK?”

“Fuck, take more than that to kill a rat like me. Me and Ralph came in early to blow out the dust collectors. When he turned it on, a fucking detonation! All that saved me is I was standing by the open truck door. Fireball blew me right outside.”

“Your eyebrows look singed.”

“Those cops are saying that maybe this wasn’t no accident. Somebody rigged it to blow. Ralph that poor sucker, blast knocked him right into the table saw, hit his head. Dead. I hope you got a good alibi where you was last night.”

• • •

Later that evening, a little past eleven pm, while Tracy was listening to music, someone knocked hard on the door. She took off her earphones. The police were looking for Jesse.

“He doesn’t live here.”

“This is the address we have for him.”

“He used to live here, but he doesn’t any more.”

Zelia and Tochtli joined her at the door.

“What’s his current residence?”

Flustered, Tracy turned to Zelia.

“What do you want?” Zelia asked the police.

One of the cops answered, “We’re looking for Jesse MacConnail.”

“Why?”

“We need to ask him some questions.”

“About what?”

“Do we have your permission to come in?”

Tochtli stepped forward. “No, you can’t enter.”

They towered over him. “Why not?”

“That’s our legal right.”

“We’ve got a warrant to search these premises.”

“Let’s see it.”

“Want us to have to come back? That’ll be a lot worse for you.”

“We don’t consent to you entering our home.”

The cop shook his head, glanced at the other, nodded, then glared at Tochtli eye to eye. “We’ll be back.”

As soon as the door was shut, Zelia said, “We have to warn Jesse.”

“With those INUF people staying over there, the phones at Fire House are probably wired,” Tochtli said.

“Then I’ll drive over there.”

“I’ll go with you,” Tracy said.

Tochtli shook his head. “No, I’ll go.”

“Tochtli, we need you here if they return,” Zelia insisted. “You know how to handle them. It’s best if you two stay, and I’ll go warn Jesse. I’ll be alright.”

• • •

Over at Fire House, Keechee Yazzie, Cayatano Azee, Dega Honawa, Thomas Keok, Glori Ocala, and Meru Ocala sat around a large table.

“We’ll need to bring in as many outsiders as possible,” Cayatano said. “Most of the local people support us, and they might walk with us, but I don’t expect them to join us on the barricade.”

“Why not?” Honawa asked. “We need them. This is not going to be successful without them.”

“They’re too vulnerable. They know there’s going to be blow back, and their families are right in the cross fire. The vast majority support us, but they can’t do it too openly. They’ll help quietly, with logistics. The local chapter chair, Carmen Tsosie, is an ally, an old friend of mine. She’ll help us in any way she can. But there are also some very conservative people out there and she has to steer around them. There’s been a long history of fighting about leasing mineral rights. There’s a lot of coal under the ground, oil, natural gas, uranium. They even tried to put in an asbestos dump right near there. Those mines have made many people sick. Some of the local politicians don’t care, all they want is to cash in as much as they can.”

Honawa tugged on a braid. “INUF can bring at least two hundred people.”

“I think we can get three hundred,” Keok said.

Cayatano turned to the small woman sitting across from him. “What will the Co-op Network provide, Glori?”

“If the last All-Worker meeting meant anything,” she responded in a deep voice, “they’ll be out in force. The Network understands this isn’t just for the Navajo Diné.” She turned to the young woman next to her. “What do you say, Meru honey? Will the kids come out?”

“The Network can probably bring a couple hundred,” the younger woman replied.

“Is that all?” Honawa scowled.

“I’m trying to be realistic. Orphan Mountain is a hundred fifty miles away, camping there, and who knows how long the blockade is going to last. Maybe three hundred.”

“How about the university kids?”

“There’ll be some students, college and high school,” Meru replied. “But I don’t know how many. The university student co-ops and other student organizations are involved, there’s a lot of verbal support, but getting them out in the trenches is another matter. They’ve turned the universities into such elite, privatized places, in service to the corporations, the students are so deep in debt that they’re afraid to stick their necks out, many of them just want a diploma and a corporate job.”

“The Warehouse will provide food,” Keechee said. “The print shop is geared for publicity. One way or another, almost every cooperative and collective in the Network will contribute. The bakeries have already started putting little info flyers about Orphan Mountain in with every loaf of bread.”

“The Network has also pledged funds,” Glori said.

“How much?” Keok jumped in.

“TBD at the upcoming meeting.”

“Did you guys discuss the route before I got here?” Keechee asked.

“We can go over it again,” Cayatano said. “Everyone will gather here at Fire House. We’ll march downtown to civic plaza, hold the demonstration and rally, take the petition to the mayor and city council. Then the next day we’ll motorcade from the city out to the camp site. Others will meet us there, INUF has done a great job organizing it; they’re coming from all over the country. The first day will begin with a sunrise ceremony, then the walk around DZ. That will take the whole day. At sunrise three days later the blockade will begin. At least that’s the date



they've scheduled to begin construction." He turned to Keok. "How's security coming?"

"INUF security—the Fire Sticks—will be the core. Fire Sticks are coming from all over the country. For march monitors, we'll recruit local volunteers."

"I'm a little concerned," Cayatano said, "to leave security to outsiders, even if they are Fire Sticks. Some of them might not understand how we do things around here. Absolutely no violence."

"If INUF or our people are attacked, we defend ourselves," Keok said.

"You know we're going to be provoked."

"Fire Sticks are disciplined," Honawa said. "We deal with nonviolent provocations in nonviolent ways. We are also ready to meet force in appropriate ways. We have to defend ourselves."

After the others left the meeting room, Glori pulled Cayatano aside. "Something I need to talk to you about."

"What?"

"Outside."

They stood near the back fence, next to a small domelike sweatlodge covered with blankets.

"That Keok. I don't like how he's always casting suspicions on people. It's destructive for the group, makes everybody paranoid."

"Being suspicious is his job. He's head of INUF security."

"What happened to Henry, that Anishinaabe?"

"I think he burned out."

"Where did this guy come from?"

"He was military, came back very angry."

"Maybe a little too angry, or acting that way. He says he's Kaw and Osage, but not enrolled. Why isn't he enrolled?"

“He says his great grandparents were left off the rolls by mistake. You know better than anybody how common that is. Maybe that’s part of why he’s so angry. We checked him out with our people, and INUF scrutinized him up and down. He comes with the highest credentials. I trust Honawa.”

“I trust Honawa too. But you’re too trusting, one of these days it’s going to bite you bad.”

“I’ve already been bit, more than once, but I heal pretty fast.”

“I tell you, there’s something about him. This Keok’s got an agenda.”

“What kind of agenda?”

“I’m trying to find out. I got my people out there too, and they’re working on it.”

• • •

Zelia drove to Fire House, distracted by her confused feelings.

She loved Jesse, or part of her did. She also felt better with some distance between them. She was so weary of his problems becoming hers. In Boston she kept everything together, while he went from one job to another, never quite managing to find himself, always blaming this or that. He had so much going for him. If only he focused, he could become anything, but he always found some distraction, he was his own worst enemy, always finding some way to pull the rug out from under himself. He’d been in and out of trouble since high school. She’d never been able to get him talk much about what first got him into juvie, and his time there, other than that it was horrible and he didn’t want to think about it. Even though he couldn’t afford any more scrapes with the law, any time he saw trouble, he jumped right in, it attracted him like a flame. They’d be walking along the street on their way somewhere, see people with picket

signs, it almost didn't matter what it was about, he'd want to stop and join them. If police detained somebody, he'd take pictures, get their badge numbers. The endless stream of marches, demonstrations, rallies, a confusing jumble of causes. What was this really accomplishing? Injustices have persisted since the beginning of time. He was addicted to some crazy vision of a world where everything was turned on its head. And even in that he was a hypocrite, he too cheated and lied, and she still hurt from it. Well, she was no angel herself.

Although it was almost midnight, lights were still on in Fire House. Inside she could hear a murmur of voices.

The door opened a crack.

"Hi Meru. I didn't expect to see you here. Is Jesse in?"

"Jesse? Keechee's friend? I think I know who you mean. Come on inside." She shut the front door. "I'll tell Keechee you're here."

A few minutes later, Keechee emerged from the large room behind two wide doors. "What's up, sis?"

"Is Jesse here?"

"Probably in my room."

"Police came to the house, looking for him."

"What did they want?"

"They didn't say."

Keechee hurried down the hall, returned with Jesse in tow.

"The factory burned down this morning," Jesse said. "Dust explosion."

"Was anyone hurt?"

He nodded. "The foreman was killed. They think it was arson. They're probably just questioning everybody."

"We told them they couldn't come in." Zelia was a bit frantic. "They said they're coming back. They'll probably tear the house apart, we'll get evicted."

“Calm down, that’s not going to happen. I’ll go straight down to the station tonight and talk to them.”

“Don’t tell them you’re staying at Fire House,” Keechee said.

“What should I tell them?”

Keechee thought fast. “Actually they watch this place like a snake, see everybody who comes and goes. So they must already know you been staying here. So it don’t matter if you just tell them the truth. But try not to give them an excuse to raid us.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t even come back here.”

“Don’t worry, we’re used to this. Tomorrow we’ll find you a new place to stay.”

“So you’ve lost your job,” Zelia muttered.

“That’s the least of my worries.”

Zelia thought a moment, then said, “Come back to our place.”

Jesse could hear the reluctance in her tone. “If you and I are going to get back together, it should be because we’re choosing to be together, not because I’m homeless and unemployed. I’ll find another place and another job.”

A half hour later, Zelia was back at the house. Tracy and Tochtli were waiting for her.

“I got a call from my uncle,” Tochtli said. “They’re looking for me too. He was really pissed, and all the time I could hear my aunt yelling in the background. But he knows how to deal with cops, so he didn’t say nothing to them.”

“What did he tell you to do?”

“He told me in no uncertain terms to get my ass down there and talk to them.”

• • •

As Jesse approached the police station, another pickup

pulled alongside him. It was Bob.

“Just passing by and seen you here. Got a minute?”

Bob climbed into the cab beside him. “How you doing, champ?”

“Hanging in there. And you?”

“Lot of unemployed benchmen in this town now, not to mention installers, and jobs like hen’s teeth. You got any leads?”

“Not really. How about yourself?”

“Nope. Daisy says hello.”

“When did you see her?”

“Told me you stopped by the café.”

“Just once. Guess I owe you something.”

“No need to thank me. This is all between friends. Hey, have you given any thought to that other thing I said.”

“What other thing?”

“Couldn’t help but notice you coming out of the toms. Been there myself. Not my idea of a good time. They been looking up a lot of people’s butts. Particularly if you got priors. They can keep you 72 hours without filing charges, release you, pick you up again. That can get expensive. Hold you on bail, send you to a private jail, find some technicality to hold you indefinitely, cram you into a room with a bunch of perverts and murderers, they get paid for every day you’re there. Don’t wait till you’re wearing orange. That’s too late. Now’s the time. Like I said, I got friends who can take care of things like that. Expunge your record, if you got one, so you got no arrests, no convictions, at least in their files. Without priors, you’re sitting pretty. With priors, there’s no telling when the law’s coming after you.”

“What makes you think I’ve got a record?”

“You’re the one who knows, not me.”

“If I did have a record, what would I have to do to get them to expunge it?”

“Just say the word, I’ll get it done.”

“What would it cost?”

“Nothing. Maybe you’ll return the favor someday, maybe you won’t. We can work that out.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Tell you what. I’m just going to do it. Consider it done. You don’t even owe me nothing.”

Inside, the officer took Jesse into a small room. About 20 minutes passed. He was getting antsy, which was what they wanted. Finally a cop came in, sat across the table, handed him a sheet of paper and pen, asked him to sign.

“What’s this?”

“Your agreement to record this conversation.”

“What if I don’t agree?”

“That’s your choice.” A long pause.

Finally Jesse said, “So what do you want to talk about?”

“Where have you been living?”

“I’m between houses. I’ve been sleeping in my truck.”

“We could arrest you for that.”

“I won’t do it any more. I’ll find a place to stay.”

“Do you know Antonio Cuauten, also known as Tlochtli Cuauhtenco?”

“He used to work at the factory.”

The cop took notes. “You were friends, correct?”

“I haven’t seen him for a while. They laid him off.”

“He was angry about being fired, isn’t that correct?” the cop said.

“I don’t know.”

“Is he an angry person?”

“No more than a lot of people.”

“He must have been angry at the foreman who fired him, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is he now?”

“How should I know?”

“Just answer the question.”

“I don’t know where he is at this moment.”

“When did you see him last?”

“At the factory, when he was let go.”

“Have you seen him since?”

“No.”

“Where were you the night of the fire?”

Daisy was the only person who knew where he was, and he wasn’t about to put that in his statement. “Sleeping in my truck.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“Where were you parked?”

“Behind my friends’ house.”

“What’s the address?”

Jesse said nothing.

The cop nailed him a long look. “Do you want to be locked up?”

“No.”

“Give us an address where we can find you, or we’ll have to lock you up.” He set another sheet of paper on the table. “The address.”

Reluctantly Jesse scribbled the address of Fire House.

“Don’t leave town.”

As Jesse left, it hit him as strange that the cop made no

mention of his record. Maybe it was just luck, he thought, and he needed some good luck.

• • •

When Jesse got back to Fire House, he found Keechee in the kitchen with Meru.

“Do you know two know each other?” Keechee asked.

Meru said, “I’ve seen you around Fire House. Your name is Jesse, right?” Her scent made him uncomfortable, her hair tinted toward sienna, in little ringlets, she was gorgeous. They touched hands.

“I’ve seen you too, with Mrs. Glori.”

“She’s my mother.”

“Meru is one of my friend Gymma’s roommates. Somebody just left their house, and they’ve got a room that might work for you. It’s a great house. It’s huge.”

“Actually not that huge. There’s five of us right now, including one of us in first grade. All the big folks are Network people. Keechee said you’re not in the Network, but it would probably work out. It’s just a little room.”

“I don’t need a lot of space.”

Jesse met Gymma Thrush a few times when he came with Keechee over to the house to visit Zelia. A softspoken young man, delicate features, slender, tall, long hair straight down behind. He was from San Tiburcio Pueblo. He worked in the Network design studio connected with the print shop. Jesse knew that Gymma and Keechee were lovers.

“Come over tomorrow,” Meru said. “I’ll be there all morning, show you around.”

“Great. Which cooperative do you work in?”

“Tech Collective.”



“I keep hearing about that.”

“We’re like the emergency room doctors for the Network. We just took in a friend of yours, Tochtli. He seems like a great guy.”

• • •

Tochtli sat at the table brooding. He was missing all those days and months and years with his daughters. He loved them so much, he’d done them so wrong. He pushed the dark thoughts down out of his head, but they rose back up. He’d tried and tried to make it work, but finally couldn’t deny to himself that it was over, he was no longer in love with her. He wanted to blame Lupe, but couldn’t. He just hadn’t understood the situation. He hadn’t understood her or himself. Where his unhappiness, his restlessness, came from he didn’t know, it was just always there, as far back as he could remember. Always uncontrollably pulled somewhere else, it almost didn’t matter where. He was just not strong enough. No, he didn’t choose to control his unhappiness, and hated himself for it. When Lupe finally gave up on him and found Robert, he thought he should be happy for her, and relieved. But instead he found himself angry and jealous. He didn’t want to abandon them, he hadn’t abandoned them, he always sent money. What the fuck is money? He hated money. He should have been giving them love. It had been a long time since he’d cried, but when he thought about his two little girls, he wished he could cry. *Maybe I should just die and get it over with.*

“Aren’t you going to go talk with the police this morning?” Zelia asked.

“I’m gearing up for it,” Tochtli said.

“Do it before they come here again. You don’t have to worry. You didn’t have anything to do with that fire, did you?”

“Of course not, but the police don’t know that.”

“Just tell them the truth. You were here all night.”

“But I was alone in my room. They could say I went out and came back.”

She thought a moment. “Tell them you were with me all night.”

“I don’t want you lying like that. I’m not going to put you at risk.”

“I’m the one at risk of losing another roommate. Besides, it’s just for a stupid police report. Nobody cares.” Even as she said it, she thought of Jesse, and secretly enjoyed the thought that he would be jealous over nothing.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Jagen was about to sit down to dinner with his wife, Emily, when he received a call. All he said was, “Um hum, um hum, um hum, OK,” but she could tell by his expression that something was up.

“I’ve got to go into Pivotal.”

“When?” She sighed.

“Now.”

“Can’t it wait till tomorrow?” She was so weary of this.

“You know how they are.”

Forty-five minutes later, he was sitting across from a balding middle-aged man with a pencil mustache in a brown suit, with a leather braided bolo tie held by a large silver and turquoise clasp.

“So, Jeff, been getting out to the links?”

“This black hole job sucks up all my energy,” Jagen replied. “How about you?”

“I manage to shoot a few holes.”

“Let’s just get to it, Dr Charlie.”

“There were questions about your last report.”

“Well?”

“Do you remember why we positioned you out into the field?”

“Any moron could tell you if you send special forces intervening in Mexico, there’s going to be blow back here. Haven’t I been punished enough? Give me a decent assignment.”

“Maybe all that paper pushing made you soft.”

“Resources are spread too thin. Too many operations at the same time.”

“Worrying about that is not your job.”

“I gave you everything I had. Can’t bleed a fucking stone.”

“We know for certain they were working out of your factory. It was a recruiting base. Fifty-eight hungry Mexicans and you couldn’t bring me even one.”

“I did my best. There was nothing there.”

Dr Charlie shook his head impatiently. He clicked on the intercom. “Thirty-two six.”

Bob entered the room, exchanged nods with Jagen.

“Bob, I want to officially apologize for the scrapes and pains you suffered in this operation, and you will be generously recompensed for them. Staff is commending you for your recent work.”

“Thank you.”

Dr Charlie fingered his silver and turquoise tie clasp, and turned to Jagen. “Bob is upset at the collateral damage.”

Jagen said petulantly, “Come off it! This is war!”

Bob crossed his arms. “With all due respect, sir, can I speak my mind?”

“Of course. This is a confidential, free, and open discussion. There will be no repercussions.”

“A week ago I might have said that motherfucker, he’s going to burn in Hell anyway, so it don’t matter. But it just didn’t have to happen that way. He was a nasty sonofabitch, but he didn’t deserve to die for nothing.”

Jagen’s eyes burned. “For God’s sake! Maybe you don’t take this seriously, but I do.”

Bob sneered. “It’s always guys like you, Jagen, in your starched white cuffs, hiding behind your so-neat desk, so

fucking fevered up to send poor fools out to kill each other, and for what? You think your pants are so clean, but if you seen what I've seen, if you done what I've done, you wouldn't hand out death sentences like... like they was Halloween candy. And these poor fools don't have a clue why they're dying! You guys are the biggest fucking criminals on the planet."

"They're dying for the soul of America." Jagen was fuming. "This country is the soul of the world. And we are the last hope for America. For civilization. This is a fight to the death, so some have to die."

"Back off, boys." Dr Charlie intervened. "Bob, I assure you that burning down the factory and that man dying were not the plan. Far from it. You two were getting nowhere with the mission, so we needed a cover for mass detentions. It was just a small IED. I repeat, I apologize for not forewarning you, but we thought that would protect you."

"Burned my fucking eyebrows off!"

"No one ever expected you to get caught in the blast."

"And you're going to blame it on the Patricios?"

"We're issuing a communiqué in their name. That has the additional benefit of getting them in shit with the Mexicans who lost their jobs."

Silence hung over the room. Finally Dr Charlie said, "There's somebody I want you both to meet." He clicked on the intercom again. "Come in, please."

A tall muscular man with a shaved head entered. He looked somewhat Mexican or Native American to Jagen, but he might also have guessed Pakistani or Filipino.

"Mr Keok has been transferred here from District 5. Ordnance, munitions, explosives, extensive experience in Central America and the Middle East, particularly false flag operations and bad jacketing. Comes with the highest recommendations. He is currently in this area as head of security for those Indian troublemakers they call the Indigenous

Unity Fire or INUF. We want the three of you to work together.”

“And the factory was your work?” Jagen asked.

“Ever heard of Orphan Mountain?” Dr Charlie went on. “The Indians around here have some kind of religion about it. A confrontation is brewing over it. We need the mountain for one of the military towers we’re building around the country to control communications. As you probably know, so many hackers are attacking our satellites from every angle, they are no longer reliable. These towers will use a new technology our scientists have come up with, a screen that all communications have to pass through, that bypasses the hacker grid. Here’s all the background information you’ll need.” He handed Jagen and Bob each a small information storage device. “After you study these files, channel your questions to Keok. He can answer most questions better than me.”

“So you’re reassigning me,” Jagen said, “to INUF?”

“And the group they call the Co-op Network.”

“A bunch of anarchists.”

“Radicals of every stripe are involved. They’re a subversive group.”

“I think you’ve been getting faulty intelligence,” Jagen said. “My sources say they’re just a bunch of kids blowing bubbles, not to be taken seriously. Mostly just squatters living hand to mouth.”

“They are an infection that is spreading through the city and through the entire region,” Dr Charlie said. “The only fully quarantined area now is the upscale residential district, workers at the base, and retired military.”

Jagen crossed his legs, then uncrossed them again. “What’s Dega Honawa and INUF want with a handful of marginal co-ops?”

“The same things as all the other subversive groups want: to use them to recruit new members and to launder operating funds. Most of them are marginal, true, but they also run a food

warehouse, which has a very significant cash flow. The warehouse channels most of their funds back into the co-ops, but in the right hands it becomes a money stream where a bear can sit on a rock and feast as the fish swim by.”

“I’m positioned to see it all,” Keok said. “The local Indian radicals centered around Fire House and INUF use the Co-op Network as a kind of employment agency for urban Indians, many of them felons.”

“They seem like just a bunch of little co-ops on the surface,” Dr Charlie went on, “but they’re building an underground economic system right in our very shadows. It isn’t just happening here, but all over the country. Since the economy collapsed, we’ve got a permanent underclass, growing every day. These co-ops are made up of people who’ll never find a regular job again. Of course they could never amass enough capital to be a real challenge. But to many people these little co-ops represent hope, foolhardy, unrealistic hope for the impossible. I’ll be frank about the situation. We may look infinitely powerful, but we actually have feet of clay. Even the army and police have no heart in it any more. These people believe in something, they’ve got a vision, even though it’s vague to most of them. Its vagueness actually gives it power. But even though their visions may be crazy, unrealistic, they are dangerous. Organizations of this type form a threat by their very nature, and in the wrong hands are explosive. They could spin on a dime, change their character, turn into something else overnight, become revolutionary organizations, and vie for real power.”

“Then let’s just shut them down.”

“Of course we can do that at any time. But orders are to leave them afloat for now. And at the same time control them.”

“Tighten the clamps,” Keok said, “loosen them, tighten them.”

“We’ve already got them in a financial stew,” Dr Charlie went on. “One of our agents arranged for funds to be missing

from their account, and for the blame to point to someone in their inner circle, but the trap misfired because their last bookkeeper was so clueless he couldn't figure it out. We managed to thoroughly discredit him, and ran him out. They need a new CFO to step in and set things right."

Jagen smiled. "And that's my assignment?"

"Of course."

"Who are their leaders?"

"Every time they have a big meeting, somebody different is up there. The real leaders keep low profiles, stay behind the scenes."

"There are two older people they rely on," Keok said. "One is this black lady who works in their office, Glori Ocala, originally from Florida. She's got a long history as a troublemaker. Half Seminole, a Black Indian. The other one runs Fire House, an old Navajo named Cayatano Azee, doubles as a native doctor, a medicine man, and uses that as a front for radical politics. The co-ops call on both of them when they need advice. Both are dangerous, and connected with INUF."

"Understood."

"So for now, the goal is intelligence, draw out every name, every one of their plans. At the same time, work so that the co-ops are deeply, irrevocably attached to the subversives. When the time is ripe we'll expose those radical attachments, discredit them in ways so they don't wind up as some kind of martyrs, the media will be behind us in full force. The final step will be coordinated actions against them and similar groups all over the country. We'll stomp them all out at the same time, put an end to this for a generation." Dr Charlie paused. "That's all. Bob, stay behind for a few minutes."

When they were alone, Bob asked, "What is it, boss?"

"I just want to touch base with you about that kid, MacConnail." He opened a folder on his desk. "Nice list of offenses. None of it too serious, granted. But adequate. We want



you to continue working him, under the changed circumstances.”

“MacConnail? He’s not material.”

“Why?”

“Too rebellious.”

“Turn that on its head. He’s vulnerable. His girlfriend is an insider at one of the targets. Reel him in.”

• • •

Later that night Jagen sat in the driver’s seat of his car, finished taking notes, then dialed a number. “Hanna. Hi sweet cheeks. Just thinking about you... Yes, me too... Can I come over?... No, I can’t stay the night, just for a couple of hours... Come on, don’t get like that... I need to see you... Yes, I’ll bring some candy... OK, I’ll be there in 15 minutes.”

He put away his phone and started the engine. In his mind he was already inside her juicy lips.

Then Jagen remembered that the last time they got together, Hanna discovered a small growth near the head of his penis. Just a little wart, the doctor removed it, it was already almost healed. But now he had to decide what to tell her. His wife Emily was less of a problem, since they never had sex now. But, even though Emily was docile, a homebody, he had also seen her fury and shuddered at unleashing it again. And Hanna had claws too.

## CHAPTER SIX

“Are you sure this wreck is going to get us there and back?” Zelia was squeezed into the back seat by the window, next to Keok and Honawa.

“Don’t worry,” Keechee responded. “This crate is indestructible.”

The roof was pushed in and only the driver’s window worked. You had to add a quart of oil whenever you got gas. The car, which belonged to Fire House, was so out of alignment that Keechee usually had to steer off the road to stay on it, but luckily there was a strong wind from the right side.

“How well do you guys know that Jimmy,” Keok asked, “the one who works in the Co-op Food Warehouse?”

“Jimmy?” Keechee responded. “Pretty well, why?”

“You know he’s a member of the Revolutionary Alliance.”

“Yeah, I know that. He don’t hide it.”

“I would keep my eye on him, if I were you.”

“Why?”

“I’ve just heard people talk.”

“What people?”

“People I trust.”

Zelia cut in, “Jimmy is one of the most straightforward, honest people I know.”

“I was just saying.”

“We’re being followed,” Cayatano said. He was in the passenger seat, watching in the side mirror a late-model sedan about a hundred yards behind them. “That’s no Indian car.”

“Slow down,” Honawa asserted. “Just a little.”

“He slowed right with us,” Keechee said.

“They’re not hiding it,” Keok responded. “They want us to know. Intimidation tactics.”

Keechee said, “We could get off the main road. I know all the back ways.”

“We don’t have time for that,” Cayatano declared.

Honawa shook his head. “Don’t worry about them. They follow our every move.”

Zelia was hoping that she and Keechee would have a chance to break away from the group and visit her stepmother, who lived around thirty miles beyond. “There’s the turnoff to Chaco Canyon. We’re getting near.” She looked wistfully down the turnoff. It was so long since she’d been to Chaco. She’d have to get back soon, just to stand there, walk through the ancient ruins. Chaco held a power that she’d never felt in anywhere else. She’d promised Jesse to bring him there, but now it might never happen.

“Stay away from those old Anasazi pueblos,” said Keechee. “Not good for you.”

“The *ch’iidii* won’t bother her,” Cayatano said. “They only go after Navajo.”

“She’s close enough.”

“What are you talking about?” Keok asked.

“Spirits,” Cayatano said, “that like to hang around old ruins.”

They drove quietly another ten minutes.

“There it is! DZ!”

Sheer white and grey striated cliffs suddenly rising almost straight up from the desert floor, like a great ship on the ocean. Beyond, a writhing bank of clouds.

“You can feel its power,” Honawa said.

Keechee added, "They say it's suspended from the sky with sunbeams."

"Spectacular." Keok said. "But not in the way I pictured it. It's got kind of a peak, but mostly it looks more like a mesa than a mountain."

"Yes, Dzil Na'oodilii is a mesa," Cayatano replied. "It's mostly flat on top. The top is long and narrow, shaped like a bow. With a low peak in the center. You can kind of see that from here."

"And it's already got towers on top," Keok continued.

"Those are radio towers. They're nothing compared to what they want to do now. But they looked big when they erected them. The government did it about forty years ago, without consulting the people. Many fought to stop them at that time. The elders said they would do great harm to Dzil Na'oodilii, and they have. But the people were also divided. Many wanted better radio, didn't want to be so isolated any more. And that was long before all this new media. This Orphan Scientific Tower thing won't be like one of those radio transmission towers. At least you can see the sky through those steel beams. This one will be a huge shaft of concrete, with a mushroom building on top, like a prison control tower. Five times higher than those spindly antennas on top now. Just its base will span the whole mesa front to back, enormous concrete columns drilled deep down, right into the heart of Dzil Na'oodilii."

"How do they expect to build something that big up there? Those cliffs are almost straight up."

"Around back it's more gradual. That's where they cut a road right up to the top. At least they didn't try to pave it. It's not used much. There are some places where it's very steep. Probably impassible in an old Indian buggy like this one. There's a hairpin turn right before the summit that's like a rollercoaster."

"The view must be great from up there."

"We won't be going to the top. It's a very sacred place. The

only Navajos who go to the top are singers.”

“Singers?” Keok asked.

“*Hataalii*. For ceremonies. We sing medicine songs,” Cayatano said.

“I knew that of course, I was just preoccupied.”

The wind swooped suddenly up, tumbleweeds and sand started to blow. “Rain coming,” Keechee said. He pointed to the sky. A dark, streaked cloud was quickly approaching from the southeast. The rest of the sky was clear and blue.

“Here’s the turnoff.”

Keechee drove along the rutted roadway to an area with some buffalo grass, snakeweed, a few junipers and desert willows.

“Stop here,” Cayatano said. “We can’t drive any further. In this season, part of this is a wash. We don’t want to wind up stuck in mud.”

They were about a half mile from the foot of the mountain, which loomed up above them. As the solitary cloud passed over the mesa, they could see dark sheets of rain pouring onto the peak, but only a few drops hit them.

They walked around the area.

“This will work,” Honawa said. “Even got a little shade.”

The cloud quickly passed the mountain, and continued moving north.

“Look,” Zelia exclaimed. “A rainbow.”

An intense arching rainbow appeared, seeming to rise out of the desert, with the other end disappearing beyond the mesa top. They watched it for a few moments, as it began to fade.

“Maybe you could explain to me,” Keok asked Cayatano, “why that mountain is so important to the Navajos.”

“We say *Dzil Na’oodilii* is the lungs of the nation. Its guardian is Talking God; the Holy People fastened it with a sunbeam and decorated it with male rain and dark clouds. They

built the first hogan on top and declared that Dzil Na'oodilii and the land around it should never change their shape. The Place of Emergence is not far away, where the first Navajos emerged from the Fourth World. Changing Woman was born here, First Man and First Woman. This is where Changing Woman lived in the first hogan, reached her womanhood, gave birth to the warrior twins, Monster Slayer and Child Born For Water, who killed the monsters that were attacking the People. They all made their home here, along with Spider Woman, Pollen Boy, Grasshopper Girl. It is one of the most spiritual places in the world, and the health and balance of the earth and all creatures depends on its well being. That is why we have to give our lives, if we have to, to protect it."

"Somebody's signaling us," Zelia said. From a far hill sun rays flashed at them from a mirror.

"That's the man we got to talk to," Cayatano replied. "He don't like us on his land without talking to him first."

They drove further down the main road, followed tire tracks into the desert, to a ramshackle concrete block house with a blue door, a number of rusting pickups, auto parts scattered nearby. They stopped a stone's throw from the house. The man was nowhere in sight. Cayatano leaned over, bumped the horn lightly. The door opened, the man stepped out, in a straw hat.

"Looks like a white man," Honawa said.

"The land here is what they call the checkerboard. It's outside the big reservation, but it's still part of Navajoland. Some of it's owned by the Nation, some by the US government, some by the state, and other parts are what they call private property, owned by all kinds of people, for instance this guy." Cayatano got out of the car, walked toward him.

"What can I do you for?" The man said from a distance.

"We talked a while back about renting that south corner of your land for a camp."

"I remember you. For some ceremony, right?"

“Ceremonies are part of it.”

“Price we talked about is still the same, package deal, whole shebang, cash in advance. Any extra days per diem. Just leave it clean, no bottles lying around.”

“We’ll leave it clean. Do you want us to sign an agreement?”

“Your hand shake’s good enough for me, if mine’s good enough for you. You paying now?”

“We didn’t bring any money. We’ll come back.”

“I’ll be here, ain’t going nowhere. Just trying to enjoy my last days looking at my beautiful mesa over there. Better look at it hard, enjoy it now, cause soon it ain’t going to look so beautiful. You know those fascist thugs are going to build a fucking prison tower on top so high you’ll be able to see it from Arizona. And just so they have a better shot at controlling their drones, shooting death rays at people.”

“Maybe they’ll build it, maybe they won’t.”

“Can’t nobody prevent them.”

“Well, we’re going to try.”

“Who is?”

“We call ourselves the Orphan Mountain Defense Committee.”

“You better start protecting it soon. They’re starting work in two weeks.”

“Not if we stop them.”

“Has this got something to do with why you fellas want to camp on my land?”

“Actually, it has.”

“I’ll be jiggered. If you’re trying to stop them mother fuckers, I ain’t taking a plug nickel from you. Use the land. My pleasure.”

They drove along the gravel track toward the mountain. As they approached, the rocks became larger and more jagged, and

the low junipers more plentiful.

“This is the blockade spot we were talking about,” Cayatano said. “The road twists around this rise. With those boulders on the left and the drop on the right, they can’t bypass it easily.”

“It presents logistic problems,” Honawa said, “for us to transport everything here from camp at the last minute.”

“But we’ve got to do it.”

“Why not further up?” Keechee said. “What about that hairpin turn right up near the top, where the slope is almost vertical?”

“That’s our fall-back position. Better to stop them down here.”

“I wonder how they plan to get a lot of big heavy equipment around that hairpin anyway,” Keechee said. “I wouldn’t want to try driving a semi around that hairpin. It’s too tight and steep.”

“Maybe they’re planning on using smaller trucks, all-wheel drive,” Honawa suggested.

“That’s their problem, not ours,” Cayatano responded.

They returned to the main road, drove another twenty miles, to the chapter house.

“We’re going to have a little talk with the chapter chair,” Cayatano said, “Carmen Tsosie, an old friend. She’s the one who got me involved with this. She was the first one in this area to know about it. When they started planning the tower, they went to her and asked her to support it, but instead she went around to the traditionals and the old radicals, a lot of who were the same people, and got us riled up.”

They all entered the office together. “We’ve got an appointment with the chair,” Cayatano said to the receptionist.

“Who should I say is here?”

“Just say Cayatano Azee and friends.”

“I’ll be right back.”

She went into the inner office, shut the door, then a few



minutes later reappeared. “The chair will see you now.”

When Cayatano stepped into the room, he was surprised to see a somewhat overweight man behind the desk. “Raymond. How have you been? Where is Carmen?”

“Chair Tsosie has been ill,” he said. “I’m Acting Chair until she returns.”

“Ill? What’s the matter with her?”

“I only know she’s too sick to work. For the interim, I will be handling all chapter business.”

Cayatano introduced the others, explained why they had come. “We’re hoping to get some support from the chapter, Raymond.”

Latero played with a pen. “I’d very much like to, Cayatano. But you know, our resources are very limited, we depend on government support, and it’s asking a lot of the people to expect them to risk the little we have. I’m their representative, and they look to me to act responsibly. If Carmen were here, she’d say the same thing.”

“So you have nothing to offer us.”

“I’ll take it up with the other council members at our next meeting.”

On the way out, the receptionist asked, “Would you like to make another appointment with the Acting Chair?”

“No,” Cayatano muttered.

As soon as they were back in the car, Cayatano said, “Carmen got elected two years ago. Promised to clean up corruption in the tribal bureaucracy. Up until then, anybody on the inside who tried to blow the whistle was somehow gotten rid of. Latero is her brother-in-law. She put him in charge of the housing program, and told him to clean house. It had been particularly corrupt; shoddy work, stolen materials, skimmed off money, kickbacks. But instead of cleaning house, Latero bided his time, one excuse after another. It was business as usual. Carmen told him either clean up or you’re out. Now he

says she's sick. Let's see if we can find Carmen at home."

Another ten miles on, they came to a group of adobe houses, a few hogans and brush shelters. Cayatano asked the others to wait while he went in.

About twenty minutes later, he returned. "She's sick alright. It came on all of a sudden, a couple of weeks ago. She just has no energy, said it feels like something is strangling the life out of her. She went to the clinic but the doctors couldn't find nothing wrong with her. Since she couldn't work, she asked the chapter council to appoint the vice-chair to take over temporarily. But instead of the vice-chair, through some kind of technical manipulations they somehow bypassed the usual process and appointed Latero. It was kind of like a coup. Two days ago she brought in a hand trembler. In Navajo medicine, he's the one who diagnoses what's wrong when a person is sick, and makes the prescriptions. The hand trembler said that somebody witched her."

"Witched her?"

"And to cure her, she needs a certain sing. It's a ceremony that I know. She asked me to do it for her. I told her I would."

"When?"

"Right away. I'll have to stay here for a few days. I'll need a helper. Keechee, if you'll stay and help I'd be deeply appreciative."

"Of course I will, *shicheii*."

"I'll need you to start right away, this afternoon, go to gather herbs. The rest of you can stay here overnight too, then return to town tomorrow."

Cayatano gave him a list of the herbs he needed.

"I know exactly where to get all of these herbs," Keechee said. "Most of them grow out in back of where my mom lives. I'd like to go collect them there, and visit her too."

"Can I come with you?" Zelia asked.

“Give my best to Esther,” Cayatano added.

• • •

Keechee and Zelia drove for a half hour on the narrow blacktop into the high desert. In the distance Zelia could see the Chuska mountains.

“I took a picture of the rainbow over DZ,” Zelia said.

She held up her camera so Keechee could see. “That’s beautiful. Did Cayatano see you take it?”

“I don’t know. Everybody was probably too entranced to notice. Would he have disapproved?”

“Maybe. DZ don’t always like her picture taken.”

“I can erase it.”

“It’s too beautiful. Save it. You were meant to take that picture. Send me a copy.”

They pulled off onto a gravel road that led down into a small settlement of a few cement block houses, domed hogans of logs and stone chinked with earth, brush shelters, sheep in a corral nearby. The kind of traditional camp they call *diné t’áá bíil nahaz’áagi*. Dogs ran alongside, barking at their wheels.

“We’re in luck,” Keechee said. “Her car’s here.”

The car was sitting up on blocks; the tires were gone.

They pulled up to a small cement block house, knocked at the door and waited.

“Doesn’t look like she’s in.”

“Maybe she’s over at Aunt Yazhí’s.” He motioned to one of the other houses, where Esther’s sister Lara lived.

From a nearby hogan, a small woman emerged, in a green velveteen blouse, a long fluted calico skirt, a kerchief tied over her hair. “*Wóshdéé, sha’alchíní. Yah ooh’ash.* This way, my children. Come in.”

"*Yá'át'ééh, shimá,*" Keechee replied.

Zelia echoed, "*Yá'át'ééh,*"

In a brush shelter alongside the hogan, a loom with a partially-finished rug stood near a smoldering cooking fire surrounded by rocks.

"*Kodi dah nohkeeh.* Sit down."

"*Ahéhee'.*"

They sat on blankets on the ground.

"Are you staying in the hogan again these days, *Shimá?*" Keechee asked.

"Yes, *shiyáázh.* I don't like that house they built me. I don't like sleeping in it. It's too square. I just use it to store things. It's got a good roof." She passed them steaming cups of tea.

"Navajo tea is so good," Zelia exclaimed. "It's been so long since I've tasted it."

"*Ch'il gowéhé.* Drink a little every day, you will live a long time and still have teeth."

"I tried to buy some, but I don't think they sell it in stores."

"Come back next month, and we will harvest some together."

"I would like that very much."

"It also makes the best orange dye. You can see it on that rug I am weaving."

"It is very beautiful."

"*Ahéhee'.* Thank you."

Esther stirred the fire. "*Da dichin nohlí?* Are you hungry?" She proceeded to make fry bread and tacos.

"How have you been feeling, *Shimá?*" Keechee asked.

"Fine. Just fine."

"Those pains haven't come back?"

"Yes, I do still have those pains sometimes."

“Have you been to the doctor recently?”

“When the pains were bad I went to the clinic. They gave me pills.”

“Have you been taking them?”

“Those pills don’t work. This is a Navajo sickness I have.”

“How do you know?”

“*Shik’i ndishnih.*”

Keechee looked at Zelia. “She’s been seen by a hand trembler.” Then he said to his mother, “And what did the hand trembler say?”

“He said that a snake gave me this problem. One day last year when I was out in the arroyos, there was a big rain. I went into a cave. I must have bothered a snake there who was living in that cave. He got mad and made me sick.”

“Did he say how to cure it?”

“Beauty Way. Just certain parts of it.”

“When are you going to have it done?”

“It is expensive.”

“Cayatano knows Beauty Way,” Keechee said. “I’ll ask him tomorrow.”

“Thank you, *shiyáázh*. Have you gone back to studying with Hastiin Cayatano?”

“Not yet.”

“All our family will be happy when you do that. It will make all our relations very proud.”

After lunch Keechee disappeared into the arroyos behind the settlement, while Zelia and Esther sat in the brush shade by the fire.

“Do you still miss your daddy?” Esther asked.

“I’ll always miss Daddy.”

“I think about him sometimes. If he was still with us, I would want to talk to him about a few things.”

“He was never a big talker.”

“No, he wasn’t. How about you, do you have a husband?”

“I’m kind of with someone, and kind of not. I can’t explain.”

“When I was young, I thought I would be rich with grandchildren. But your brother was my only baby, and I know now that he will not give me grandchildren. So I have been hoping to have grandchildren through you. If you find your husband someday, I would like to meet him. But if not, you will be happy anyway. You have always been very independent, like me.”

“I’ve always admired that in you.”

“Navajo women are all very independent. It is our tradition. We come and go as we please. It has made us strong. But it can also cause us problems.”

Zelia understood that Navajo women traditionally own their hogans, sheep, and fields, grow their own corn, squash, and beans. “Is that part of why you and Daddy broke up?”

“Your daddy wanted a different kind of woman. I was never happy in the city. I wanted to have a Navajo life out here in *Diné Bikeyah*.”

“Don’t you ever get lonely out here?”

“I have plenty of company.”

“I’m still very sad that you broke up.”

“Separating is not bad, if living together is not right. You remember that story about First Man and First Woman when they separated, don’t you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’m sure I told it to you when you were little. It’s one of those old Navajo stories about things that happened in the Third World, or maybe in the Fourth World. I’m not sure which.”

“This is the Fifth World, right?”

“Yes. There are four lower worlds beneath this one, from which the Earth People emerged.”

“And there are more worlds above us?”

“At least one more above us into which the People will enter some day.”

“So why did First Man and First Woman separate?”

“I’ll tell it to you another time.”

“Tell me now.”

“It’s a long story. I’ll just tell you some of it. Their problems started when First Woman was pregnant with the first People. They began to argue and fight. One day he came home with a deer and, instead of saying, ‘Thank you, my husband,’ she said, ‘Thank you, my vagina.’”

Zelia grinned. “Thank you, my vagina?”

“First Man said, ‘You should thank me for the deer, not thank your vagina.’ First Woman answered, ‘The only reason you do anything is for my vagina. That is why I thank her; she does the work.’ First Man said, ‘I don’t need your vagina. I can do just fine without her.’ First Woman said, ‘And I don’t need your deer.’ He said, ‘Maybe you should just live by yourself.’ She said, ‘Maybe I should.’ The next morning he told all the men what had happened. They all had similar experiences. First Man said, ‘The women don’t respect us. Let’s all move out!’ So First Man and the other men crossed the river and built themselves new hogans there. For a while First Man and First Woman both did just fine without the other. First Woman and all the women lived very well on their corn and squash and beans and fruits from their fields, they learned how to make fire by themselves, and hunted birds, just like men.”

“And did First Man and the men cook?”

“It was fall, so the men did not have time to grow crops before winter. They lived only by hunting that first year, and did not eat well. But they got Nádleeh to cook for them.”

Zelia watched the embers jump. “Who’s Nádleeh?”

“A Holy Person in the Lower World. Nádleeh taught the People how to use pots, metates, water jars, stirring sticks, dippers, and all the cooking tools. Nádleeh was both a man and a woman at the same time. That is why the Navajos still call some people *nádleeh* today, and always treat *nádleeh* with respect. Ask your brother, who we say is *nádleeh*. I don’t know if there is a word like that in English. Anyway, that first year the women did better than the men. The women feasted on their harvest. But the next year it didn’t rain, and the harvest was small. The men’s fields were dry too, but they got more food by hunting than the women. Then they started to miss each other, so much that some of them, both women and men, started having sex with animals. The men who had sex with animals all got hit by lightning and killed. The women had strange babies who ran off like animals into the desert. The drought continued year after year. The women had very little to eat, became weak, did not have the energy to work their fields. Their animal children—we call them the Nave’i—they came back from the desert and attacked them. The People were dying. First Man gathered all the men together and said, ‘What good is life if the People are dying.’ All the men agreed. They went down to the river’s edge and called across. First Woman and the women called back. The women asked the men to return. So they got back together again. After that they treated each other with more respect.”

As light dimmed, Keechee returned. Night came on; inside the hogan, they curled up on sheep skins and blankets on floor.

Zelia said, “*Shima*. Are you asleep?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to the animal children?”

“The Nave’i caused the People many problems for a long time, but finally they were beaten by Monster Killer and his twin brother Born of Water, the sons of Changing Woman. But that is another long story. Now I am asleep.”



• • •

Back at the Food Warehouse, Zelia depressed the lever on her control panel, moved the forks down, backed out, headed her forklift toward the dock for another pallet. Down one of the rows she saw Keechee and Jimmy. They waved her over.

“Look sis,” Keechee said. Emblazoned on their tee shirts was the photo she had taken of the rainbow over Orphan Mountain, and beneath it, *PROTECT MOTHER EARTH* and *CO-OP NETWORK*. “I showed your picture to Gymma, he showed it to the rest of the design collective. They’d been working on a logo for the Network for a long time, but nothing they came up with seemed right. As soon as he showed them this, they jumped on it. They’ve already silk screened a big stack of tee shirts, and they’re working a banner.”

“I’m amazed.”

“What’s your size?” Jimmy asked. “How about medium?” He pulled a tee shirt out of a box, and handed it to her.

She slipped it on over her work shirt. “How does it look?”

Keechee stepped back. “*Nizhoni*.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Over the weekend, Jesse settled into his room in his new communal house that he now shared with Meru, Gymma, and a couple with a six-year old girl. The house had a nice layout, so everybody had some space. He was happy to have a place of his own, but found himself still continually brooding about Zelia.

On Monday he drove with Meru over to Network Central. She went to work on a project at the Tech studio, while Jesse exchanged a few words there with Tochtli. They both realized that they wanted to talk more. Tochtli said he could break away in maybe twenty minutes, so Jesse walked around the corner to Community Bakery to wait for him.

Jesse sat at one of the small sidewalk tables. Tracy saw him and came out.

After some banter, Jesse asked about Zelia.

“Is she seeing anybody?”

“Not that I know of. But that’s not my business. Do you want to be with her?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have to tell her.”

“Every time we talk, we get into a disagreement.”

“About what?”

“It doesn’t matter what. Anything we talk about.”

“Maybe she thinks you don’t listen to her.”

“Is that what she said to you?”

“Yes. But I’ve seen you do it.”

“She doesn’t listen to me.”

“And I’ve seen her do it. Maybe you two need a counselor.”

Jesse rolled his eyes.

That raised Tracy’s hackles. “If you’d be a little more flexible, you’d see that counselors can really work. We use conflict resolution facilitators at the Network all the time. At the very least you’d get a better understanding of the problems.”

Just then Jesse saw Tochtli appearing from around the corner, and said hurriedly to Tracy. “I’ll talk to her again, and see what happens.”

Tochtli sat down with them.

“How do you like the Tech Collective?” Jesse asked him.

“It’s fun. A great group. That Meru’s out of this world.”

“Isn’t she, though? Did she tell you I’m her new roommate?”

“She asked me about you before they took you in, to check you out. Of course, I gave you thumbs up.”

“So what was that gizmo I saw you working on?”

“A part from the cooling system in one of the trucks. Tricky.”

“Do you have any interest in going back to woodworking?”

“As a hobby, absolutely. For a job, I’m committed to this for now. How about you?”

“I’m going to swing by the Wooden Coyote after this, and see if I can get in.”

“Well, good luck. You might be a day late. They just took in somebody you know.”

“Who?”

“Lorenzo. I just saw him around here yesterday.”

Twenty minutes later, Jesse peered into the Wooden Coyote Co-op though their chickenwire door, then rang the bell. A bearded man with glasses answered.

“I think I met you last time I was here, about six months ago,” Jesse said. “I’m a cabinetmaker.”

“You look familiar,” he replied. “I’m Bruce, by the way.”

“You didn’t have any openings then. I’m just checking in again.”

“Do you have a portfolio?”

“I’m still just getting started. I been working the last six months in a cabinet factory across town in the industrial park.”

“The one that burned down?”

“That’s the one. I heard that a friend of mine from there is working here now. Lorenzo. I think he’ll vouch for me.”

“Well, here’s our situation. Two of our oldest members, they’re a couple, a weeks ago the father of one of them passed suddenly, and his mother needs to be taken care of, back in East St. Louis or some place like that, so they both jumped a plane and headed there. They’re going to be gone at least six months, and they might not be coming back at all. So we’re taking in a couple of people to replace them. We already took in your friend Lorenzo, like you know. So there is another opening. Our shop meeting is next Monday noon. If you’re serious, come and meet the collective.”

“I’ll be there.”

• • •

Jesse couldn’t pull his mind off Zelia. He was distracted, and thought about her all the time. He became determined to get back together with her and somehow make it work.

But Zelia put him off. She felt cleansed by her trip out to Orphan Mountain, and didn’t want to deal with the intense, convoluted feelings they elicited in each other.

Finally they met at the park by the river, and went walking.

“I want to be with you” he said.

“We can’t go back to the way it was.”

“I’ll work to change things. I’m sorry.”

“I’m very happy to hear that. I think you don’t realize how rarely you say that.”

“Say what?”

“That you’re sorry.”

“I wasn’t ready before. I’m ready now.”

“I’m very wary about just falling back into our old ways.”

“We’re not going to do that.”

“You know I’ve missed you. I’ve been pretty lonely, nights have been difficult.”

“It’s hard for me too, just falling asleep by myself, I was so used to being with someone.” Then he quickly corrected, “With you.”

“That was always one of your problems, you don’t like to be alone with yourself. Back in Boston, when we broke up for a while, you jumped right into something with that girl.”

“So did you.”

“I didn’t.”

“You told me you did.”

“It wasn’t the same. That was just some stupid little thing. I was hurt, I was getting back at you. Nothing even happened.”

“Why do you say, nothing happened? Of course it did.”

“Now you’re going to make me the bad guy, right?”

“I’m not the bad guy either.”

“Well, I hope you didn’t just jump into something with somebody else again this time. I didn’t.”

Jesse was wishing it wouldn’t come to this. He wanted to lie, but couldn’t. “I got together with this woman. One night. It was a mistake. It was very stupid.”

“What woman?”

“Somebody I met in a café.”

“Certainly didn’t take you long.”

“She was nobody. You don’t know her.”

“You’re out of control.”

“I’ll never see her again.”

For a few instants Zelia said nothing. Then, “That’s it. I’m through.” She turned abruptly and walked away.

He followed her. “I’m sorry. What more can I say?”

“Just leave me alone.”

“I’ve changed, believe me.”

She stopped and turned. “I’m tired of crying. Now I’ve changed too. Go live your life, however you want to, and I’ll live mine.”

• • •

Tracy could see that Zelia was feeling down, so put a hand on her shoulder. “How about we go out together tonight, just you and me. It’s been so long since we did that. We used to go out all the time, somehow we just stopped.”

Zelia pulled herself together. “That’s a great idea. Maybe we’ve just gotten too used to seeing each other every day in the house. Where do you want to go?”

“How about that new bistro?”

“Which one?”

“The one we always pass on the way to Network Central. They have live music, I’ve heard it’s not so loud, we could find a table away from the stage and talk.”

A half hour later they were snacking on tapas while they perused the drink menu.

“I think he’s getting sick of me already,” Tracy said.

“He’s crazy about you.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“It’s true.”

“He wants to rearrange shifts so we’re not working together so much. He says we work together too much of the time.”

“That might be good for both of you.”

“Good for him, maybe.”

“I think you might underestimate him.”

The waiter appeared at their table. Zelia ordered a glass of merlot, while Tracy ordered a virgin.

“Oh come on,” Zelia said, “have a glass of wine. It’s not as much fun drinking alone.”

“I guess I have to tell you. I missed my period.”

“Aren’t you using anything?”

Tracy shook her head. “Jack doesn’t like them.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I know.”

“Have you told him?”

“Not yet. I don’t want to mess this up,” Tracy said. “The last time I felt this way was in high school.”

“You wouldn’t mess it up by telling him.”

“I can’t talk with him in the same way I talk with you.”

“Just be honest.”

“Honesty with guys is different.”

“How?”

“They’re got different triggers. You touch the wrong trigger, and suddenly it’s over. I want to keep this going as long as I can.”

“I think you’re nuts not to tell him.”

“He loves children. He loves families,” Tracy replied.

“And you haven’t taken a pregnancy test?”

"I bought one, but I haven't taken it yet."

"Why?"

"Maybe I'm not ready to find out."

"Don't you want to know?"

"Of course. I just don't want to be disappointed."

"You need to do it as soon as possible"

"I want a family with him."

"This is not the best way to go about it. Tell him."

"I'm waiting for the right moment."

"What if his reaction is not what you want?"

"I want his baby no matter what."

"You have to tell him. Very soon."

"But what if it just scares him?"

"Better you find out now. You need to hold onto your options."

For a while, neither spoke. Zelia held the tapered bowl of the wine glass in both hands, and swirled it with small circular motions. Then she nursed a sip of the rich dark wine. "Actually," she said, "I'm envious."

"Why?"

"You have so much to look forward to. Even if it's just a daydream with Jack, it's a beautiful one. While I'm a mess."

"You're not."

"Jesse and I aren't getting back together."

"Have you spoken with him lately?"

"It didn't go well."

"He stopped in the bakery the other day."

"What did he say?"

"He asked if you're seeing somebody."

"That's just like him. I wish I was seeing somebody. Then I



could put all that behind me and move on. It's such a weight."

"Just throw it off your shoulders."

"One day I feel Jesse and I are finished, then the next day that we're not."

"There are a lot of nice guys out there."

"Maybe I just haven't met the right one."

"What if you've already met the right one, but you just don't see it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe you should just be a little more open."

. . .

At the weekly Food Warehouse collective meeting in the office, Claire, Jimmy, and the others sat in a circle, while Zelia explained the Orphan Mesa Defense Project.

"All the Orphan Mesa Defense Committee is specifically asking from the Warehouse at this point is food to help feed the camp for the first few days."

"How many people are they expecting?"

"Maybe five hundred. They're hoping for more. They'll mostly be cooking big vegetable stews, so it really won't cost that much. And they're not asking for an open-ended commitment, just for the first few day, to get it off the ground."

"I think we can handle that."

"Aren't they also asking for money? We need to know that."

"They're going to ask the All-Worker meeting for that."

"That's kind of the same thing."

"It is and it isn't. The money would come from the Network fund, not from the individual cooperatives. It would just be for gas and stuff like that."

“We can settle that at the Network meeting next week,” Claire said. “Any more discussion on this topic? I think we have a consensus. Anybody disagree? Let’s just move on. The next item is finances. Jimmy.”

“I’ve been filling in as bookkeeper since the fiasco with Harold,” Jimmy said. “Here’s the situation. To tell you the unvarnished truth, I’ve been in over my head. We grew so fast, our business skills kept lagging further and further behind. So to look at the Food Warehouse today on the surface, we’re very successful. An enormous amount of product goes through this place, out to the cooperatives and collectives every day. But we’re really struggling to get a handle on it. We badly need professional help. Fortunately we have an applicant with many years of experience, who comes with the highest recommendations, and is generously willing to help us at rates that we can afford.”

He turned to a thin man in jeans and a black turtleneck, sitting in a far corner.

“This is Mr. Jeffrey Jagen.”

Jagen stood. “As you can see from my resumé,” he said, “I have over twenty years experience as a bookkeeper, financial analyst, and CFO. I’ve saved many progressive firms and nonprofits on the rocks from lack of business acumen.”

“Do you understand the problems we’re having?” Claire asked.

“Absolutely. I’ve taken a cursory look into your books. You have problems for sure, but they’re not hopeless. I understand what you’re trying to do. I want to help. I’ll work pro bono until we get you on your feet. I’ll teach someone in the group how to do it right. I’ll oversee your financial planning and operations. I work for several businesses at the same time, so I’ll never need much—if anything—from you in terms of salary. Once you’re on your feet, I might start asking for nominal fees for my services, at the nonprofit level, we can negotiate that. Since I understand you’re very closely connected, I’m making the same

offer to both the Co-op Network and the Food Warehouse.”

“You understand,” Zelia said, “that the two are separate organizations.”

“I understand that. I’ve seen the Network books as well as the Warehouse books. Although the two have separate accounts, they have almost identical problems, and the finances of both organizations are so closely connected that they should be dealt with together.”

“When can you start?” Claire asked.

“Right away.”

Claire looked around. “What do you all think? Anybody disagree? Looks like we’ve got a new bookkeeper.”

Jimmy shook Jagen’s hand and said, “Welcome aboard. Lucky us.”

“Now, before we break up, I got one more thing,” Claire said. “This isn’t an agenda item, it’s an announcement. Barbara.”

Barbara, who’d been sitting in the back, stepped forward and said sheepishly, “You’ve probably been wondering why I was playing hookey from the bakery and sitting in at your meeting.” She and Claire locked arms.

Claire said, “Barbara and I are getting married next month. Everybody’s invited.”

Everyone applauded, the two laughed, then kissed, then laughed some more.

• • •

At Wooden Coyote Cooperative Woodshop, the workers stood around the benches explaining to Jesse how the shop operated.

“It’s really important that you clear off the bench when you’re done using it. Leaving a work in progress is fine. But we’re sharing all the benches. We don’t have enough space for

everybody to have their own bench. You can't be too territorial. We've had people here who just had that urge to stake out their own territory, like a tom cat, and weren't good at sharing. You got to get over that if you want to work here."

"I think I can handle that," Jesse said. "After working in that sweatshop, this place looks like paradise to me."

"I can vouch for him," Lorenzo said. "He'll be a good addition to the woodshop."

The doorbell rang, and Bruce went to answer it. "Looks like our other applicant is here."

Jesse turned.

Bruce said, "This is Bob. I talked to him on the phone. He's an installer."

"Howdy," Bob said. "I see you already got a couple of old work buddies of mine here, so it already feels like home."

Another collective member said, "Tell us a little about yourself."

"I just work job to job, installing. I wouldn't take no work away from the rest of you. Just use me for installation when you need me. No muss, fuss, or bother."

"So how would you use the shop?"

"I'd just need a bench once in a while, for some special molding or something. I really wouldn't take up any significant space in the shop. Just a little place to keep some hand tools and stuff. Man, this place is a stunner. I'm already nuts about this shop, makes me wiggy just looking at it. Imagine not having no boss. From what Bruce here told me over the phone, I'd fit right in here, if you guys will let me."

Bruce took up, "From what I see, Bob would just make a minimal impact on the shop. So he's not in competition with Jesse. If we like them both, we can take in both of them."

"I say we take them both."

Jesse loved the woodshop. He spent the first few days trying

out all the machines. He wasn't yet hooked into a job. But he needed a desk at home, so he decided to make one. Nothing very elaborate, functional but beautiful. He loved trees and wood, and he wanted to do right by them. The tree was already dead, the lumber was kind of its skeleton. Out of respect for the tree, he wanted to give it a second life by making something out of its bones that was useful and beautiful. He saw some rift white oak in the lumber rack, under a layer of sawdust, indicating that it had been sitting there a while. It turned out to be left over from a job, so he arranged to use it and barter something back in return. Doing the design drawings and cut lists was fun, choosing the pieces carefully for grain pattern, jointing and planning, fitting, dowelling the joints, tapering the legs, gluing up the top, sanding and varnishing. After several days of focused work, he wound up with a desk he could stand back from and feel proud of.

. . .

Jesse finished clamping the faceframe onto the case, wiped off the excess glue, put away his tools, picked up the nozzle, blew off the bench and his clothes.

"Leaving early?" Lorenzo asked.

"Got to go, see you in the morning."

He had made an appointment to meet Zelia. She was waiting for him outside. "Where shall we go?"

"Let's just drive somewhere," she said.

Zelia headed toward the mountains. They didn't say anything for a long time.

"How've you been doing?" she finally asked.

"Up and down. And you?"

"I stay busy."

They drove quietly another few miles. She took an arbitrary

turnoff, continued into the desert, pulled over a cattle guard, and shut off the engine.

“I’ve missed you,” she said.

“I’ve missed you too. I wish we wouldn’t keep doing this to each other.”

“Sometimes I think we’re each other’s worst enemy,” she said.

“Do you want to try it again?”

“Part of me does.”

“And the other part?”

“I’ll always love you, Jesse, you know that, you were my best friend.”

“You just don’t want to be around me any more.”

As they looked into each others eyes, familiar emotions welled up in each, and they sank into a deep kiss. Almost by instinct, Jesse slipped his hand into her shirt and held her breast.

She pulled back. “This isn’t right.”

“Let’s just do it,” he said. “We can work it out.”

“No. I’ve got to move on.”

She started the engine, they drove back in silence.

• • •

Tochtli was puzzling over parts of a refrigeration unit upon the bench, when a familiar face came over.

“¿*Qué tal, ese?*” It was Lorenzo.

“*Bien ¿Y tú?*”

“*Bien.* How do you like working in the Tech co-op?”

“Sure beats the *maquiladora*. How’s the woodshop?”

“*Bien*. Can’t tell you how glad I am to be out of that hellhole. If some angel didn’t burn it down I’d probably still be sweating there.”

“Yeah, sometimes bad luck turns out to be good luck,” Tochtli said. “You ever see Hector around?”

“All the time. He’s my *mano*.”

“He find another job?”

“Still looking.”

“Did you bring him over to the Food Warehouse?”

“Yeah. He hasn’t scored so far. Hey, I heard you been doing Danza Azteca.”

“Where you hear that?”

“I was driving by and seen you in the park. Looks good. *Escucha*, I’m getting together with Hector tonight, just hanging. Maybe you’d like to come hang with us.”

A few hours later, Tochtli, Lorenzo, and Hector were sitting in a back booth at the cantina. It was a slow night, not too crowded, the usual assortment of characters.

“You still got much family back there?” Hector asked.

“In Puebla? Sure,” Tochtli replied. “But most of my family live here and in Hermosilla.”

“I thought you told me they were from Puebla.”

“That’s further back. They come from around Zapacoaxtla. I been down there and met them, stayed with them a few days, but I don’t really know them all that well.”

“Where’s that?”

“In the mountains, near Puebla.”

“I always wanted to see Puebla,” Lorenzo said. “Cholula. But I never made it down there yet.”

“People told me,” Hector said, “to stay away from Puebla these days. Between the narcos, the government, and now all these gringo mercenaries, the roads ain’t safe.”

“That’s exaggerated,” Tochtli replied. “I was just there six months ago, no problem. A few federales came on the bus and checked IDs, that was all. I didn’t see a trace of narcos, no private armies, none of that.”

“You were lucky.”

“I’m not saying they’re not there. I know they’re there. I’m probably swinging back down there in a few months. My dance troupe is talking about going on tour. For some reason they’re interested in Danza Azteca groups from up here, even though their local ones are much better.”

“That’s just the way people are,” Lorenzo said. “*La naturaleza humana.*”

“*Órale, ese,*” Hector said. “Listen. When you go, maybe could you deliver something to a friend of mine down there.”

“Why not just send it?”

“You know why. It don’t get there.”

“I’ll be traveling light.”

“This won’t weigh much.”

“What is it?”

“Just an envelope. It’s going to a friend in Puebla.”

“What’s in the envelope?”

“No big thing. I could tell you, or maybe you don’t want to know.”

“I got to know before I agree to do it.”

“What do you think of the Patricios?” Lorenzo said.

Tochtli looked hard at him, and finally answered, “They do good work.”

“They work for the people,” Hector said.

“Right,” Lorenzo said. “For the people. We wouldn’t ask you this if we didn’t trust you, *ese.*”

“You’ll have to take very good care of it,” Hector said. “In exchange the trip won’t cost you nothing. We’ll get all your



expenses. You'll be able to dance, see your family, it won't cost you nothing."

"What did you say is in the envelope?"

Hector nodded at Lorenzo, who said, under his breath, "*Mosca.*"

Hector added, "*Asuntos. Finanzas. For the Patricios.*"

• • •

The next day, Tocti took a break from work and drifted over to Community Bakery for a coffee and scone. When Jack saw him, he scooted over.

"I got an idea," Jack said to Tochtli.

"Shoot."

"I told you that my family's from this village in the highlands of Guatemala."

"Sure, I remember."

"Well, the main industry there is weaving. They make blankets, rugs, and huipiles, and belts, purses, all kinds of stuff. In some villages the women do the weaving, but in my village the men do it. I don't know why."

"There must be a story."

"They have a cooperative to buy materials and do marketing. It's been so successful they raised enough money to build a health clinic and start a credit union. Anyway, here's the point: Zelia told me that you got family in Mexico who grow coffee, and they have a co-op there too."

"Right, outside of Puebla. They grow the coffee on little plots way up in the mountains, load it on burros to carry it down, and then transfer it all onto their co-op trucks, to cart it down to their mill."

"Well, here's my idea: we set up trade between the Network

and your people's cooperative and my people's cooperative. Co-op to co-op. Our stores and cafes sell their coffee and weavings. Solidarity among cooperatives, recycle it back into the community. Take it to an international level."

Tochtli thought a minute. "You know I haven't been in the Network long, but I keep hearing people talking about that kind of thing. As far as I know nobody's done it. Actually, I'm going down there in a couple of months, to Puebla. I'd like to try to arrange it."

• • •

Before she met Jack, Tracy thought the Mayas no longer existed. Despite occasional news reports about the operations of American military contractors in the Mayapan conflict, she somehow still thought of these modern Mayan people as separate from the ancient Mayas. She had a vague idea of the Mayas as a mysterious people whose ancient civilization collapsed, and were reduced to only a few primitive people living in the Central American jungles when the Spaniards arrived. Jack explained that the Mayas still had a high civilization when the Conquistadors invaded, that they fiercely resisted for decades, far longer than the Aztecs, and that there are millions of Mayas still living in their ancestral homeland today.

Jack was the only child of Santiago and Hereminia Ixcuna, who immigrated to Oakland two years before he was born, to escape the horrors of civil war. Although there was a Guatemalan Mayan community in the Bay Area, and although it was instrumental in helping them get settled, after Jack was born they distanced themselves from it, and rarely took him to any of their cultural events. This they felt was a sacrifice they were making to help Jack grow up as a North American. Santiago found a job in Oakland as a letter carrier in the postal service. Hereminia struggled with English, but English was the

only language they spoke at home when Jack was around, so he did not grow up speaking either Spanish or Maya-K'iché. More from a desire for community than from any deeply-held beliefs, a few times a year they attended a Catholic Church. While Jack's paternal grandparents still lived in Guatemala, his mom's parents lived in L.A. They spoke only Spanish and Maya-K'iche', so Jack could barely communicate with them. Jack learned some street Spanish, but it was rough. When he studied it in high school, his parents began to use it around the house in front of him, to help him. But it remained always a second language to him, and he knew very little K'iche'.

And yet, his parents were very proud of their heritage. They kept a quote from the sacred book *Pop Wuj* framed on the wall:

*We Mayas are a plant, a stone and a planet, the universe, nothing and all, we are link and chain.*

*Ri uj mayib' winäq, man ka k'ista qa wach, cho we uwach ulew. Jas uj k'o jun che', jun ab'äq, je kuj petik jas ri ke juluw chokaj. Xa jun qa b'anik qu nojel, jas ujk'o q'am ka qa chapom qib'*

His father explained that it meant that his well-being was tied to the group, to his people. His success was their success, their success his. We are all links in a chain.

When he was nine his father first took him to Guatemala, to the remote mountain village of Chuwatz'ak, where he himself had grown up. This first glimpse of Jack's family's world was an amazing experience. The low stone houses, cooking fires, the sweat houses, his grandfather Serapio at his big square wooden loom, his grandmother Josefina grinding corn *masa* on her *metate*. K'iche' was the language of the home, and grandma Abuelita spoke only enough Spanish to get by at the market. Grandpa Abuelo gave Jack one of his beautiful blankets to take home and he kept it always on his bed.

Jack wound up in New Mexco by accident. After high school he spent a few semesters in junior college in Oakland, and did well enough. But he felt directionless. He grew up with a story

his mother repeated all too many times, which he really didn't remember ever happening, how he'd decided to become a lawyer during the summer of his eleventh year, to fight for social justice, after a friend's family had been deported for being here without papers. For a long time he humored his parents and told them he planned to go to law school. In reality, while he did care about social justice, he had little interest in law. Then when the economy collapsed, he dropped out, like numerous other students, because there seemed to be no future there. He decided he had to get away from his childhood, out of Oakland, and start over somewhere else. The Southwest was an arbitrary choice, primarily because he got a ride with a friend who happened to be driving there.

Jack kissed Tracy's nipples. "I think I taste something," he murmured, "Something very sweet." Then he worked his way up Tracy's neck. He gave her a few little bites under the chin, met her lips. They sunk into a deep kiss, tongues intertwined.

Tracy took his testicles in her palm. She loved their weight and enjoyed the thought that in her hand she potentially held the key to her children. She slipped down, looked at his penis, wrapped it in her palm. She eased back the foreskin and gave it a little peck of a kiss on the tip. She still hadn't gotten over the novelty of his foreskin. She wondered what she would do if they had a boy. To have a grandson with a foreskin would be a monumental rejection to her maternal grandparents, though they would consider him Jewish no matter what, since she was the mother. But to reject the sacrifice of that little piece of skin, the initiation into the tribe, the symbol of the Jews' covenant as God's Chosen People, was almost unthinkable to them. Then she remembered that Jack told her that the Mayas also thought of themselves somewhat as a Chosen People.

For an instant the words, *I think I'm pregnant*, sat on the tip of her tongue.

Tracy worked her way back up his body and snuggled into his chest.

Jack held Tracy tight. "I've never known anybody like you," he said

"Am I safe with you?" Tracy asked.

"I love you very much."

"Do you mean it?"

"Of course."

"Do you want to be with me always?"

"You know I do."

"Would you still love me if I told you I'm pregnant?"

For a moment he said nothing. "Don't joke about that."

"I'm not joking."

"You're not, are you?" He burst into a smile. "Then it's a miracle."

"Yes, a miracle."

"Together we made a miracle."

They held each other for a long time.

"I was worried that you wouldn't be happy," she said.

"I feel like my life is just beginning today."

"Our life," she said.

They lay there quietly.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“What are you making?” Tracy asked.

Zelia had bright fabrics spread over the table.

“A tunic. Part of my regalia.”

“You’re serious about this.”

“I wish I done this in high school.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“My papi would have taken it as a rejection.”

“But he was Mexican.”

“Not this kind of Mexican.”

A while later, after Tracy went to bed, Tochtli came into the living room, where Zelia was sitting on the couch with a sketch pad and colored pencils, working on designs for her dance regalia.

She showed him a few of the sketches, and he made some suggestions. His thoughts kept wandering back to his daughters; he told himself he should not feel guilty but it just made him numb. He realized he wanted to feel closer to Zelia.

“I’m kind of tired,” he said, “Is it alright if I lie down and rest my head?”

She laughed. “Of course.”

He lay on the couch with his head near the side of her leg. With one hand she continued sketching, while with the other she stroked his cheek. She touched his chest, he placed his hand over hers and held it there.

Tochtli said, “Cempaxóchil is going on tour.”

She set down her sketchbook. “On tour? For how long?”

He sat up. "About four weeks."

"To where?"

"Mexico."

"Mexico! When is this happening?"

"In a couple months," Tochtli replied. "We're going all the way down to Puebla. I think I'll even be able to duck away to my grandmother's village for a few days."

"I'm very happy for you."

"You don't look happy."

"It's just that... You know I want to join the troupe."

"You can still do that, there's plenty of time. And you can come on the tour."

"I don't think I can afford it."

"I'll pay for it."

She started to say something more, but he rose up, smothered the words with a kiss, it was so tender. They drew their tongues slowly along each other's teeth. Almost in spite of herself, she found her fingers sliding down his stomach, along his sex and felt the magic of its hardening.

She stood, led him by the hand into the bedroom.

Tochtli slipped his penis head into the delicious sensations, slid in all the way, until he could feel the center of his being nuzzling right up against hers. A feeling of power surged through her. They relaxed in that position, luxuriating. Zelia felt so contented, there was nowhere else in the world where she would rather be.

• • •

A few days later, Tracy asked Zelia, "Have you told Jesse?"

"I haven't seen him since."

"At some point soon you have to tell him. It's probably

better if he hears it from you.”

“When he’s upset, he can get volatile, sometimes he just loses it.”

“Maybe he would be relieved.”

“I just hope he and Tochtli can still be friends.”

“It usually doesn’t work that way.”

• • •

Gymma, Meru, and Jesse decided to spruce up the house, paint the kitchen. They went through some color samples, decided on a very light blue, with a slightly deeper shade for the woodwork. Jesse and Gymma prepared the room, while Meru went out to buy the paint.

As they worked, Gymma saw that Jesse was in a bleak mood. Gymma asked him what was wrong, but he just clammed up. Finally Jesse said, seemingly out of nowhere, “Have you always been gay?”

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s probably got more to do with me than with you.”

“Do you think you’re gay?”

“I never thought about it much until now. It’s just that I always have so much trouble with women. Maybe something is wrong with me. Like they left off some part when they put me together, or assembled something backwards.”

“That don’t mean you’re gay. That just means you’re screwed up. Gay people don’t have anything wrong with them. And being gay won’t fix your problems.”

“How do you know when you’re gay?”

“You just know it. What presses your buttons?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s usually easy for a gay guy to tell if another guy is gay.



Once in a while you can be fooled. Anyway, I've seen the way you act around all different people, and you don't seem like a candidate to me."

"How do I act?"

"For example, when Meru walks into the room, you go weak in the knees."

"I don't."

"Anybody could see it."

"Do you think she sees it?"

"Of course. And she likes it."

"You're making that up. She's not interested in me."

"You'd be surprised."

Meru got back with the paint, rollers and trays, and they were just about to start, when Gymma said, "Where's the paint for the door frames and the baseboards?"

"I forgot it, stupid me. I'll go back and get it."

"No, you two get started on the walls. I'll go get it."

Jesse and Meru started painting.

"Where'd you grow up?" Meru asked.

"Worcester, Mass. How about you?"

"Oklahoma."

"How'd your family wind up in Oklahoma?"

"They were in Florida a long time ago. There was a war. That was way back in the 1830s. We lost the war, and they made us walk to Oklahoma."

"What war was that?"

"Seminole."

"You're Seminole?"

"And a little Muscogee. Mostly Black Seminole. How about you?"

"I'm kind of mixed, in a way. Irish and Scots. From a

distance people think they're almost the same thing, but they're really not. My Irish side are Catholic and my Scots side are Presbyterians. They didn't want to have anything to do with each other. Didn't have anything good to say about each other. Both told me the other one was going to Hell. I guess I rejected them both, and they rejected me. Made me a kind of outsider."

"What kind of work did your family do?"

"When I was little my dad worked in a refinery. Later he became a plumber. My mom worked part time in the office of a motel. How about you?"

"My daddy was a high school history teacher, but he got in trouble for some of the things he was teaching. Then he became an auto mechanic before he passed."

"How about your mom, Glori?"

"When I was little she didn't work. Then they sent one of my uncles to prison, and she got interested in the law. She kind of taught herself. Then after Daddy passed, she got involved in civil rights, prisoners' rights, got arrested a bunch of times. She had to fight our own tribal government sometimes. Kind of became a jailhouse lawyer, mostly for Black Indians. Mom's done a lot of things. Do you give thanks to the Creator?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you said you rejected both of your family's religions. I'm just curious, I guess."

Jesse set down the paint roller. "Once when I was little my granddad took me over to the ocean. He wasn't like the rest of the family, he was kind of a free thinker, they disapproved of him. I don't remember how it came up, but I must have asked him what God looked like. We were sitting on a sand dune. He pointed to the horizon in the south, then moved his hand very slowly over to the horizon in the north, and said something like, 'That's what God looks like to me.' I guess it made me see things different, the ocean, waves, sand, sky, clouds, birds, it was like I was really just seeing them all for the first time. Now when I hear that word, that's what I always think about, that's kind of

what it means to me, so sure I believe in the Creator, if that's what you mean. How about you?"

"As far back as I can remember I was taught to be thankful to the Creator. I don't know about the word *believe*. It's kind of a white man's word. I don't think Indians believe in the same way. We don't really believe one way or another. We just live in this world, and this world is sacred because it is the world of the Creator."

They painted for a while more. He moved the ladder. "How long has your mom been involved with INUF?"

"Mom's been working with them for a long time. I mostly just come along. I get her out of trouble."

"Wish I had somebody getting me out of trouble. I feel like I've been in it all my life."

"It just follows some people around. You've got to get good at dodging."

"I think I'm getting better at it."

• • •

Just as Jesse was entering the woodshop, Tochtli came down the hall.

"Haven't seen you for a while, *compañero*. ¿*Que tal?*"

Jesse said. "Come on in and I'll show you what I've been up to."

He brought Tochtli inside and showed him the piece he was working on.

"You made that?"

"From scratch. This is actually the first piece I ever made from start to finish, all by myself."

"I like that bookmatch grain pattern. Very nice."

"Thanks."

“One of these days I’ll get to build some nice furniture too.”

“Well, you’ve got a good shop over there too.”

“Actually, I’m really getting into this refrigeration thing. It’s all about solving problems. You got to follow the logic of it.”

“Woodwork has a kind of logic to it too.”

“Wood is more organic. I’m dealing with mechanics, physics.”

Jesse asked abruptly, “How’s Zelia doing?”

“Fine.”

“It feels so weird, after talking with her every day for so long, not being in touch. Working in the same building with her makes it even weirder. We avoid each other. She’s still mad at me. I don’t blame her.”

“It’s hard. Making changes is hard,” Tochtli said. “I know I’m not good at it.”

“But what’s done is done. I hope she’s trying to move on.”

“She probably is.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Nothing, really.”

“You’re her roommate, you’re around her all the time.”

“I don’t see her that much. We’re both always working.”

“I’m just curious.”

“What’s between you two is between you two,” Tochtli said.

“Help me out. Is it anybody I know?”

“If I say something, are you going to be mad?”

“Of course not. We’re buddies.”

“OK. Me and Zelia have been seeing each other.”

Jesse said nothing, then, “For how long?”

“Not long.”

Even though he no longer really expected to get back with

her, Jesse felt a wild anger rise up inside him, the same anger that had raged uncontrollably so many times before, an anger that seemed to know no bounds, when he would strike out at anyone and everyone around him, regardless of consequences. But it wasn't Tochtli's fault, it wasn't Zelia's fault. He was primarily angry with himself. But he knew it wasn't even his own fault. It was just life. With all the effort he could manage, he swallowed his pain. "I'm glad for both of you."

"When you need me, man," Tochtli said, "I'm here. I've got your back."

"I've got your back too."

"¿Abrazo?" Tochtli asked.

"Abrazo," Jesse said.

They hugged and patted each other's back.

Jesse returned to the woodshop. He was alone. He went over to the piece he was working on, some white oak table legs. He picked up his hammer, then before he realized what he was doing, he found himself smashing the work over and over again.

He stopped, caught his breath, set down the hammer, and sobbed.

He pulled himself together. *I swear as of this day, this is the last time. I will never be violent, under any circumstances, ever again.*

• • •

A few days later, Meru walked in and saw Jesse curled up by the fireplace with a book.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

"*The Cattle Raid at Cooley*, the Irish national epic," Jesse said. "Nobody outside of Ireland has ever heard of it. It was written around the year 700."

"Where'd you get that?"

"I found it in the free box outside the bookstore."

She laughed. "Nobody except you would want to read something like that."

"I like old obscure books, particularly ones that that nobody else wants."

"What's it about?"

"A war between provinces."

"I hate war stories."

"This is different. They're fighting in chariots over a bull, kind of a super bull. Queen Medb of Connacht is involved. Spirits from the underworld take sides. All kinds of things happen on *Samuin*. That's what we call Hallowe'en, it's really a druid holiday, a crack opens between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and spirits pass through it."

"Sounds kind of like the Day of the Dead."

"Pretty much the same thing. The original is in Gaelic. Someday I'm going to learn Gaelic."

"Why? Nobody still speaks it."

"Yeah, they do. In certain towns on the west coast of Ireland they call the Gaeltacht. Someday I'm going there and I'm going to talk to my own people in their own language."

"That sounds like my fantasy of going to Oshogbo."

"Where's that?"

"Nigeria, a few hours from Lagos. They speak Yoruba there."

"Isn't that some kind of war zone?"

"That's all happening further north. Nigeria is a big country. This part is safe, as far as I know. Anyway, I have an aunt who married a Yoruban. He was an exchange student here when they met. Oshogbo is his family's village. They traveled there together on a visit. She learned some Yoruba. She came back with all these incredible stories, like about a festival for a river goddess named Osun. When I was little I was so amazed, it became kind of a place of wonder that I always dreamed of

visiting, and learning some Yoruba. Kind of like going back to my roots, even though I don't have any particular reason to think that this was exactly where my ancestors came from."

"I thought you said your roots were in Oklahoma and Florida."

"Those are two of my roots. My third root is in Africa."

"They say we all come from Africa."

"I actually have a connection with Ireland too. Through my Choctaw side."

"You told me you were Seminole."

"I'm a little Choctaw too. Families where I come from are very mixed. Anyway, back in the early days, not long after the Choctaws were forced to leave their homeland and trek to Oklahoma, they heard that Irish people were dying during the potato famine, even though there were other crops, which the English wouldn't let them eat, because they were exporting it all to England. This is a story that everybody in my old community knows back in Oklahoma. The Choctaws empathized with the Irish so much that, even though they were very poor themselves, they took up a collection and sent a hundred seventy dollars to Ireland, to help feed the people there who were starving."

"I'll tell you what: we'll learn a little Yoruba and a little Gaelic, fly to Oshogbo, or wherever that place is, for a couple of weeks, then on to the Gaeltacht."

"You sound serious."

"Dreams are always serious."

Later that night, Meru was sitting in bed thinking, nursing a slight headache, when there was a knock on the door.

"It's me," came Jesse's voice. "Can I come in?"

"I guess."

He entered the room.

"What?"

“I was just thinking about what we were talking about.”

“What about it?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry. I should leave.”

“No, stay. Shut the door.”

“I wanted to talk some more, but now I don’t remember what I wanted to say.”

“Come here,” she said. “Sit down.”

He sat gingerly on the bed next to her.

Neither one said anything.

Jesse leaned toward her, Meru’s perfume drew him in, Jesse circled her in his arms, she rolled toward him, he caught his breath at the touch of her breasts against his chest. His body had never responded to a woman like this before. His nearness made her come alive instantly, without reserve. Jesse reached down and opened her labia; she felt a tremendous elation as he slipped inside her. He looked into her eyes, and felt in a place so perfect, so familiar it was like reliving a past life or a repeating dream. They lay that way a long time, scarcely moving, each savoring the closeness of each other and each hoping it would never end. They each made little movements at first, even just suggestions of movements. He gave her a tiny pat on her butt; she knew exactly what he wanted, turned over and came up on her knees. He entered her again, reached around and held a breast in each hand, as she rolled her torso in small intimate circles. They kept this position, eyes shut, consciousness a star in some very deep space, then she turned over again. He took her legs, lifted them onto his shoulders. She felt so complete with him inside her, wanted to stay that way for as long as she could, scarcely moving, just feeling the oneness of their joined bodies, the excitement and sensation rising and flowing, finally the release they shared. Later they lay holding each other, relaxed and savoring the moment as long as possible, still washed by the waves of feeling.



## CHAPTER NINE

Glori, Cayatano, Keechee, Zelia, Claire, Jimmy, Meru, and Bruce sat with city council members Gomez and Sharpen, along with their aides, at a long oval table in a city hall conference room.

“Our people helped you guys get elected, and it wasn’t easy,” Glori said. “Now is your turn to help us.”

Council member Sharpen replied, “You can count on both of us, haven’t we made that clear?”

“The only thing you’ve made clear is you’re giving us the runaround.”

“We’re just two out of seven,” Councilmember Gomez protested. “The city has a reputation of being much more progressive than it actually is. We’re the only true progressives on the council. As a whole the council is very conservative.”

Claire said, “Except when it comes to election slogans.”

Glori leaned forward. “We met with you about this four months ago. You promised it would be on the agenda.”

Gomez said, “It must have fallen through the cracks. Now we can’t put it on the agenda, it’s too late, and if it’s not on the agenda we can’t talk about it.”

“You’re our elected representatives,” Claire said, “and you’re not allowed to talk about it? What’s going on here?”

Sharpen folded his arms. “It should have been processed through the various commissions. If this had been done properly, it probably would have been ready and able to fly. But now, like this, it’s impossible.”

“You say you can’t put it on the agenda now,” Glori went on, “but the city changes the agenda, fast tracks all kinds of projects

all the time.”

“When the mayor’s on board, or the city manager, or the city attorney, yes they often manage to cut through all the tape and protocol, but without them our hands are tied. You don’t understand how difficult this is to do.”

“We asked you to put it on the agenda months ago,” Jimmy said. “But you kept saying it would be more effective to wait until we’re as close as possible to the tower construction starting date.”

Cayatano added, “It’s not like we’re asking for money. Just a resolution. A gesture. A resolution about a mountain a hundred fifty miles away in the middle of the desert. Why aren’t all the council members on board? What have they got to lose?”

Sharpen replied, “First of all, they sincerely don’t care, and even if they did, it costs over \$50,000 to get elected to the city council. Where do you think that money comes from?”

Bruce sighed, “Let’s get out of here. We’re wasting everybody’s time.”

Councilmember Gomez shrugged. “Most people don’t realize that the council really doesn’t have much power. Everybody thinks we do, but we don’t. People don’t understand how government works now. Even the mayor is almost powerless. It’s mostly a ceremonial position. The city manager’s really in charge. The council hires him and we can fire him, yes, but he doesn’t take orders from us.”

“Then who does he take orders from?” Keechee asked.

“From the system. He’s a trained cog. If we fire him, all we can do is hire somebody just like him.”

“Then what does the city council actually do?” Zelia asked.

“We set policies, young lady, and even that is in a very narrow framework.”

Glori said, “So mostly you’re flack catchers, up there just to make this thing look like a democracy.”

“It’s not that bleak,” Gomez replied. “We have discretionary powers in many situations.”

“If you would have told us all this before the election,” Cayatano interjected, “maybe we wouldn’t have bothered working so hard on your campaigns.”

Sharpen’s back stiffened. “You wouldn’t be in that building today without allies in city hall.”

“We appreciate the help you’ve given us in the past,” Jimmy said. “But the only reason we’re in that building now is because we faced down the sheriff and the deputies, because we marched through the streets, because we caused you all so much trouble that it was more to your political advantage to let us stay than to follow through with the eviction.”

Glori jumped in, “The next city council meeting is Tuesday, right? We are going to have all our people, and all our friends and supporters, gather in the council chambers and demand that the city at least listen to us and accept our petition.”

“The entire Network will be there,” Bruce echoed. “We’re going to make noise like this town hasn’t seen in a long time.”

“Please listen to me,” Sharpen said.

“We been listening to you long enough,” Glori said. “Now it’s time you listen to us.”

“Just listen to him,” Gomez repeated. “For just a minute more. Be reasonable. It’s for your own good.”

“I beg you,” Sharpen continued, “when you come to city hall, to just control yourselves. Don’t go overboard. I say this for your own sake. Some of the police have been out of control ever since that mob smashed up old city hall. They’re trigger-happy, itching to have an incident they can blame on the victims.”

“We know it only too well,” Glori said. “We’re not going to give them an excuse to shoot us, but we’re also not backing down. We want that resolution on the agenda.”

After the delegation left, as they walked down the broad marble staircase, Glori said, “I propose we call a special All-

Worker meeting at the Food Warehouse tomorrow at six.”

The council members and their aides remained in the room.

Sharpen said to Gomez, “One of us has got to talk to the city manager, so the city’s not caught unprepared.”

“I think it’s my turn,” Gomez replied.

• • •

Later that day, Police Chief Donaldson and Acting Chair Raymond Latero sat at the same conference table, waiting for the mayor and the other expected attendee.

Latero said, “This is the first time I been in the new city hall. This used to be the school board building, didn’t it?”

The police chief replied, “The council had to move the school board down to the basement.”

“Did you ever get convictions on those rioters?”

“Some of them. Not all. You know how the courts are. We know the guys who did it, we just couldn’t get evidence against them. The judges just let them walk. The old revolving door. Pathetic.”

“Too bad.”

“Well, they’re not going to get away with it again. We’ve got this building on 24-7 watch.”

“But, you know, if there’s enough of them, they can do pretty much anything they want. They burned down the New York Stock Exchange, didn’t they?”

“Their police force wasn’t adequately armed. That pussy mayor of theirs. How are rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons going to stop a raging mob?”

“I hope your guys are better prepared.”

“Don’t worry, we are.”

Mayor Robles peeked his head through the door. “Sorry to

keep you waiting.” Dr Charlie followed him into the room, accompanied by a young woman. “This is Special Agent Charles Henderstone, and you know my aide Marcie.” They sat down across from the others at the long table.

Dr Charlie said, “I want to thank you, Mayor Robles and your staff, for pulling this meeting together at such short notice, and you, Chief Donaldson and Chair Latero, for making room in your crowded schedules. I know you all have very full plates. But you also understand the importance of this. We have received grave reports from our people in the field, reports of serious subversion in progress. A number of local and national underground groups have joined forces behind an organization called the Orphan Mountain Defense Committee, which is a loose coalition led by Indian radicals from the organization called the Indigenous Nations Unity Fire, and anarcho-socialists from the local subversive organization which calls itself the Co-op Network.”

“Do the San Patricios have any connection with this, as far as you know?” the police chief asked.

“Not directly, according to the intelligence we’ve received to date. But anywhere there are Mexicans or Mexican-Americans, or Central Americans involved, or really any Hispanics, we assume that they’re there.”

“Excuse me, sir,” Latero said. “I may be exposing my ignorance. I’ve heard of course about the Patricios, but I don’t really have a good handle on them. At first they sounded like a prison gang. Now I hear different stories.”

Dr Charlie exchanged a glance with the police chief. “Do you want to take it, Chief Donaldson, or should I?”

“Go right ahead.”

“They definitely have a strong presence in the prison system, primarily because there are so many Mexicans there. But they are much more widespread. The Patricios first appeared when we began sending military contractors into Mexico to help their government—their so-called

government—fight the narco-mafia gangs and cartels. But in many instances there was almost no difference between the narcos and the government. So the contractors' role had to expand to defend our interests, which includes all the properties of the American and transnational corporations doing business there, which is very extensive. Then with this Mayapan uprising, it's spread further south into Central America.”

“Excuse me, but I still don't understand who the Patricios are.”

“A fifth column. An underground organization primarily of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans undermining the war effort.”

“Why do they call themselves San Patricios? What's Saint Patrick got to do with Mexico?”

“The original Patricios were way back in the 1800s, during the Mexican War, when we rightfully took the Southwest and the West Coast away from Mexico to fulfill what they used to call our Manifest Destiny. The original Patricios were mostly Irish immigrants who came over during the potato famine. We herded them direct from the boats onto trains headed for the Mexican front. When they got there, a lot of those fools deserted and joined the enemy. Formed their own brigade under that name. The traitors fought against us. We hanged them, at least the ones we caught.”

“Back in those days,” Chief Donaldson added, “they knew how to deliver swift justice.”

“But let's get back to today,” Dr Charlie continued. “The actions these radicals are planning out on the reservation could have dire consequences for the entire region. Construction is scheduled to begin on the Orphan Scientific Tower, and they're gearing up to stop it. Obviously that's impossible. Their real aim is to use it as an organizing tool, gather the so-called public behind them. They plan to bring out hundreds or even thousands to a camp they're setting up on the only road to the site, bringing in troublemakers from all over the country, to blockade the construction crews. It's a publicity stunt, and their

media dupes are spinning it to their advantage.”

“Why don’t we just take them out?” the mayor asked.

“Because of the risk of having this thing grow. We don’t only have to take them out, but to make them look bad in the process. They need to look like they deserved to be taken out.”

The mayor scratched his chin with his left hand, while with his right hand, under the table, he fingered up the hem of his young aide’s short skirt and gently squeezed her knee. “Then what’s the plan?”

“As you know,” Charlie continued, “they’ve circulated a petition demanding that the city council pass a resolution opposing the tower. They plan to deliver it by a march across town from their headquarters, which is located at this Indian place called Fire House, rally in front of city hall, and then they’re planning on barging up to disrupt the council meeting. We have to deal with it with silk gloves because they’ve got two sympathetic council members. The police have to be prepared for riot control.”

As the meeting broke up, after the others had all shaken hands and were headed out the door, the mayor pulled Latero aside.

Mayor Donaldson said, “I just want to check in with you, Raymond, about how that road project is progressing.”

“Moving right along, your honor. Your staff got in touch with me, and all the details were negotiated.”

“My only concern is that the work be done right. And, you know, that involves using only contractors that we have confidence in.”

“You understand that our regulations prevent me from signing no-bid contracts.”

“Of course, of course.”

“It’s important that these contracts are awarded fairly and openly. But there is always a lot of rumor mongering around the reservation, which we are nipping that in the bud. The bidding

process is really just a formality.”

“Excellent. As you know, open government has always been a hallmark of my administration, and I plan to keep it that way.”

“We understand each other perfectly, your honor.”

They shook hands. “As always, it’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

“The pleasure is mine.”

Outside, the police chief and Dr Charlie climbed into the Special Agent’s shiny dark late-model sedan.

“So what do you want to discuss? I’ve got a very full plate today, I’m keeping people waiting,” the police chief growled impatiently.

“The conversation we’re about to have never happened. This is classified at the highest security level.”

“OK, shoot.”

“A new national contingency plan on urban rioting is being implemented. Security forces in every major city are being briefed. Each region has a unique strategy to restore public order, to be executed only in situations of the utmost gravity.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“If the situation requires it, we are going to take covert action.”

“Who is we?”

“The target will be city hall.”

“The target of what?”

“The covert action.”

“Meaning what?”

“You will be informed of that at the appropriate time. Meanwhile, you need to prepare for the aftermath. The covert action will trigger a state of emergency and the suspension of civil law. Your job will be to restore law and order in the aftermath.”



Police Chief Donaldson repeated, "To restore law and order. Is this going to be another episode of your guys starting another riot?"

"You know we never planned for them to wreck city hall the way they did. They got carried away. And the ones responsible have been reassigned."

"Right," Chief Donaldson said. "Yes, sir." He carefully closed the car door behind him. As he walked slowly away, the chief shook his head. He thought of a few guys he knew who'd love to put this dignified gentleman out of his misery, and he probably wouldn't even have to pay them. Then the chief pulled himself together. *Well, just another three years before I can retire to Hawaii.*

Charles Henderstone, PhD, returned to his office and sat brooding. He glanced around the bookcases and files lining three walls of the room floor to ceiling. He locked the door, watched pornography for a while, but it aroused nothing in him.

How had he reached this point?

Sixteen years ago he was a young lion, an upcoming assistant professor of philosophy in Kansas, a long-held dream come true. But the reality of campus life was dismal. He abhorred teaching, except for a few honor student sycophants and brownnosers he tolerated for an occasional sexual dalliance. He had published in several respected journals, received some honors and awards, but all the major venues eluded him, snubbed him. And this college was really an insignificant backwater. His envy of those who had authentically made it knew no bounds. He, a true lover of knowledge who understood the highest values, was unappreciated. Worst of all, he was too proud to ever speak of his pain. That was one of the great ironies of his existence, he seemed successful to everyone around him, on a tenure track, but he was miserable.

Then one day a government agent contacted him regarding activities of the department chair, his superior. Her research

was obscure, so obscure that few would ever read it and even fewer would understand it, but somehow she had unearthed information that was deemed threatening to a certain corporation that was also a key funding source for the basketball team. How the government got involved, and how this made her a security risk was never adequately explained to him, but he didn't really care. Dr Charlie, as he was affectionately known even then, was enlisted to secretly discredit and eighty-six her. The agent played on his vanity and ambition by intimating that he was in line as her replacement. Dr Charlie adeptly accomplished his mission, and no one outside the inner circle ever suspected his hand in it. Her career was in ruins and her research dismissed. But in the aftermath, Charlie was passed over for department chair, and a bitter rival appointed. At his moment of triumph, Charles Henderstone, PhD, was denied tenure and handed his walking papers.

He picked himself up, applied to numerous other institutions, but his dismissal became a haunting albatross. He finally took a position as a high school teacher. His second wife left him for a taxi driver. At perhaps the lowest moment of his life, he recalled the thrills he'd had while briefly playing secret agent. He contacted the Agency, reminded them of his past relationship, and asked for a job. Before long this second career took off. He dumped his high school position without notice, and began working fulltime for the Agency. They arranged a cover job for him, a sinecure as a financial advisor, a field of study about which he knew less than nothing. He loved the intrigue of undercover work, but he also longed to take public credit for his accomplishments, which was of course impossible. The praise he got within the agency meant nothing to him, in large part because he had contempt for the intelligence of most of the other people working there. Once again he could talk to no one about it, not even to his third wife, not even to his psychiatrist, and he needed more than ever before to keep up appearances. So in an ironic way he was successful again, but also miserable again. It was a familiar place, a place he hated.

He picked up the phone, dialed a number.

“Hi, punkin.”

“Oh hi Daddy, I haven’t heard from you for along time, what’s up?”

“I just called to hear your voice.”

They chatted for a few minutes, about nothing, made their goodbyes.

He hung up, swallowed a few pills, chased them down with a couple of stiff shots of bourbon, reached into the desk drawer, grasped his .45, stuck the barrel in his mouth, and licked it with the tip of his tongue.

Then he slowly pulled it back out, wiped off the saliva with his handkerchief, carefully folded his hankie and tucked it back into his suit breast pocket, laid the gun back in the drawer again, slid it shut, locked it, and placed the key in its usual hiding place.

## CHAPTER TEN

Jesse and Bruce were working together on a small kitchen remodel. As they assembled the refrigerator box, they chatted, the usual banter.

Bruce held the pre-finished side and the top at right angles with a framing square. “No, I’m not much of a sports fan any more. During the playoffs sometimes. How about you?”

Jesse shot 15-gauge 1-1/2 inch brads with the compressed air gun, to tack the pieces together. “I like to watch once in a while, but I don’t really care who wins.”

Bruce asked, “So then what do you do when you’re not pulling splinters out of your thumbs?”

“Same as everybody else: drink beer and wonder why the world is blowing up.”

“Do you like to read?”

“Sure.” Jesse drove in the screws with a cordless screw gun.

“What kind of stuff?”

“All kinds.”

“How so? What’s the last thing you read?”

“I’m reading this book called *Strike!* It belongs to somebody in my house. I don’t remember who wrote it. It’s about all these famous strikes. You know, like union strikes. It sounds like the most boring thing in the world, but it’s really good stuff.”

“Some of us are in a reading group that you might be interested in joining. It’s all Network people. We’re meeting tonight at the Tire Patch, you know, the bike repair cooperative.”

“What do you read?”

“Different books every month. Mostly connected to what the Network is all about, you know, political stuff, cooperatives, collectives, direct action, the commons, revolution, that kind of stuff. Do you think that might interest you?”

Jesse finished screwing the box together. “Sounds like something I heard about a while back from one of my old roommates.”

“Who?”

“Zelia, from the Food Warehouse. She and I used to be roommates, before I joined the woodshop.”

“Yeah, she comes sometimes. You know other people who come too.”

“Who?”

Bruce fitted the exposed side veneer panel. “From the Food Warehouse, Jimmy and Claire are also regulars. Jack from the Bakery comes sometimes, and Barbara and Tracy. Other people from the bakery too. From Tech, Tochtli was at the last session, and Meru. From our shop, besides me, Lorenzo and Bob were there last time too.”

“Meru is one my current roomies. She didn’t mention anything about it to me.”

“We’re meeting tonight. Would you like to come?”

Jesse carefully ran a bead of yellow glue around the front edge and set the face frame on top. “Is this sponsored by the Network?”

“Informally. It’s entirely cooperative and collective people, but technically it’s not a Network project. Some of us belong to other organizations too, and some don’t. I’m a member of the Collective League, for one. You’ve heard of CL, haven’t you?”

“I’ve seen the newspaper around the building.”

“I’ll give you the latest copy. The other main group is the Revolutionary Alliance. Jimmy is a member. You’ve probably seen RA literature too. The League and the Alliance actually

agree about most things, we often work together.”

“Then why aren’t you just one organization?”

Bob and Jesse both tightened clamps around the face frame, and carefully wiped off the excess glue.

“We’re all stronger in smaller autonomous groups. If the movement were centralized, it would be easier for them to come in, cut off a few heads, and that would be the end of it. This way we’ve got so many heads, if they cut off one, others pop right back up.”

“So it’s tonight, you say? What time?”

“Seven-thirty.”

“What are you reading?”

Bob went over to his knap sack, rifled through it, pulled out a dog-eared book, and handed it to Jesse. “Different articles from this book, *The Cooperative Commons*. This month’s article is about something very closely tied to the Network. Acequias.”

“What?” Jesse set down his clamp and leafed through the book.

“They’re systems of ditches, community ditches that they’ve used for centuries here in New Mexico to carry water from the mountains and rivers to the farms and ranches. Acequias are a local precursor to the Network, and we have strong ties with them. There are over 800 acequias here. They were started by the earliest settlers who came here from Mexico around four hundred years ago. The ditches are still managed collectively by acequia associations, community membership organizations that are run democratically. It doesn’t matter how much or how little land you own, just like the Network it’s one member, one vote, like any cooperative. The association regulates who can release water to their fields from a particular ditch, when they can do it, recycling, maintenance, annual spring cleanup. They protect water quality, soil conservation, local traditions, wildlife habitat, etc, etc. Water is a commons.”

“What do you mean, water is a commons?”

“The commons is all around us. All the most important things. Air, water, nature, culture, resources. Resources which should be accessible to everyone on earth.”

Jesse began stapling on the cabinet back. “So where does the Network fit in?”

“The Network’s main focus is the work commons, the industrial commons. The industrial zone all around us is burned out now, right? The government and the corporations abandoned it because they decided it wasn’t making enough money for them. For them it’s just money. For us it’s our commons.”

“Everybody around here talks about corporations,” Jesse said. “like they’re some kind of conspiracy messing up the world. I kind of agree with that. But at the core of the matter, we’re all just people, aren’t we? Just people messing up ourselves.”

“We’re all just people caught up in a system whose goal is to exploit the planet for the benefit of a tiny elite.”

“So where does that leave us?”

“We’re the opposition, taking take back the commons, piece by piece.”

Later that evening, on the way back home after the reading group session, Jesse and Meru were still talking about it.

Jesse said, “I think I finally understand what the Network is all about.”

“It’s not always apparent,” Meru responded, “when you’re working day to day in your little shop.”

“Even more, I think I’ve finally found something I’ve been looking for all my life.”

“What’s that?”

“Something I can believe in.”

• • •

“Why are you getting involved with somebody like him?”  
Glori said.

“I didn’t say I was involved with him, Ma,” Meru replied. “I just said he’s living at our house now, so I wanted you to meet him.”

“You never in your life wanted me to meet a man for no other reason. Anyway I already met him, when he was sleeping on the floor at Fire House because they kicked him out of wherever he was. And if I remember right, he didn’t even have a job.”

“He left that house because of one of the other people.”

“Same opposite thing. Probably some woman he did badly by.”

“He’s working in the Network now. He’s a good guy.”

“From what I’ve seen, he’s just a little boy in a big man’s body. You got to stop selling yourself short. You don’t need another distraction. There’s serious work ahead. You’ve got a whole life, you got to be patient, there’s lots of men out there with something real to offer you.”

“You always find everything wrong with anybody.”

“I just want the best for you, baby.”

• • •

Jesse was in the shop routing mortises for pin hinges in the stiles of inset doors when Bob came up to him, and said, “You interested in that Indian thing they got going on?”

“What Indian thing?”

“You know, about how the government is doing something to one of their mountains. It’s all over the Network. You must have heard of it. Everybody’s all worked up about it.”



“Yeah, I know about it.”

“I figured you would. Anyhow I volunteered to help them out, and I thought maybe you’d want to work on it with me. The Network’s done a lot for us, taking us in and all, and they’ve kind of adopted this project, so it’s only right that we do something back for them.”

“What did you volunteer to do?”

“They say there’s only one road up that mountain, and they’re planning on blocking it up, so those construction crews can’t get up there. Well, I know a place where we can get a couple of truckloads of logs for free. We just have to drive up there and cart them away. Those Indians can use them for their blockade. And you and me’ll have done them and the Network a good turn.”

The next day, Bob and Jesse rode in the big flat bed, 2x4 stakes in the side pockets, along a winding mountain road, through pine forest hills of red clay.

“Ain’t much farther.”

He pulled off on a little track. Private property signs. Chain across the road.

“Don’t worry about that padlock. Just looks locked. Snaps open.”

Bob drove through, Jesse replaced the chain, climbed back in the cab.

They drove a ways, turned a bend. “There it is.”

It looked like an abandoned mine, with industrial buildings and structures falling apart. Bob pulled the truck around back, and stopped alongside a pile of logs that looked like they’d been sitting there a long time.

“How’d you come upon this?” Jesse asked.

“Been driving these hills since before they was raised up from the valley. Know where every turnoff leads.”

“You’re sure this is OK? I can’t afford another scrape with

the law.”

“Nobody gives a flying fuck about this shit, and if they did, you already know we got friends you know where. Don’t go acting like some kind of nervous nelly, or you ain’t going to get nowhere with the cheerleaders.”

They loaded up about thirty logs, ratcheted them down, and took off.

Two hours later, they drove into Orphan Mountain Camp.

A couple dozen tents circled a big open space, people milling about. In the center, Honawa, Cayatano, Keok, and several others were digging a wide hole. Honawa set down his shovel and started over. Cayatano and Keok followed.

“That’s a nice load, brother.” Honawa said.

“Plenty more logs where these came from. We can bring over another load, if you need them. I know where to get lots of old tires too,” Bob said.

“We really appreciate this,” Cayatano said. “Bring them all. We’ll take them.”

“Where should we drop them?” Bob asked.

“Just over there is good, in that space near the shrubs, out of sight of the road.”

Cayatano went back to his shovel, while Honawa and Keok helped them unload.

“What are you guys digging over there?” Jesse asked.

“Firepit,” Keok answered.

“Are you two planning on staying at the camp?” Honawa asked.

“I can’t,” Bob replied. “Too much going on back in town. But I’ll be here for the showdown. Meanwhile, I can drive folks and supplies in and out.”

“I’m planning on staying at the camp, starting after the march on city hall,” Jesse said.

“Reason I asked is that we need one more fireman.”

“What’s that?”

“The firemen tend the fire, make sure it’s going at all times, day and night, while camp is up.”

Keok added. “It’s a very important job, a great honor.”

“Since you’ve supplied us with the gift of all those logs,” Honawa said, “we want to offer it as a gift back to you.”

It was such a beautiful afternoon, Jesse went walking in the desert toward Orphan Mountain. The prickly pears were coming into flower, with yellow and purple petals emerging above the spines of the flat fleshy pads. A jackrabbit darted from the roots of a cholla cactus, and disappeared into an arroyo.

Honawa sat by the fire pit, writing in a notebook; Cayatano and a few other were building a brush shade shelter nearby.

Bob and Keok stood off to one side, leaning on shovels near the latrine.

“Pivotal asked me to talk to you about something,” Keok said in a low voice, even though the others were out of hearing distance.

“Why didn’t they contact me direct?”

“They want you to recruit Network people into the black bloc.”

“A black bloc? For what?”

“For that march on city hall they got planned. Pivotal wants a few of them wearing ski masks. They don’t even have to get into the action. Even one will do. The actual black bloc will be our own people.”

“Then why do they need to involve Network people?”

“Why do you think? So they have somebody to arrest.”

“Why don’t you organize them yourself?”

“You’re the insider.”

“I don’t feel good about this,” Bob said. “Why does Pivotal

want people running around smashing everything? What's that going to accomplish?"

"Don't worry, it probably won't even come to that. It's just a noose, an option Pivotal wants to hold up its sleeve. They won't spring the noose unless a contingency forces their hand."

"And they want me to set up some patsies."

"Right."

"From that expression of your face, Bob, I'd think a dog ate your dick."

Bob shook his head. "Hanging around these kids must be getting me down."

"How's that?"

"Most of them are just so fucking innocent."

"That's the way sheep are," Keok replied.

"You know, Keok, I really don't like you. I bet your balls ain't half as big as you think they are."

Keok smiled. "That's OK, Bob. I don't like you either. But I ain't going to have a pissing contest with you about it. We're both just doing a job."

"You ever think of getting into a different line of work?"

Keok laughed. "Like what? This is all I know. They recruited me direct out of special forces. How about you?"

"I grew up with it. My dad and my uncle were both company men."

"You got kids?"

Bob answered gingerly, "A daughter. Lives with her mom."

"I got five. And two angry bitch ex-wives. There's no way out for me."

"That's what my dad always said. That poor sucker wound up a nut case, and Uncle Joey was pushed out a window. I don't know about you, but as for me, I'm not spending the rest of my life drowning in this shit." Bob thought about the years he tried

to fight it, but when he was arrested for transporting a truckload of marijuana, they used that to draw him in.

“Here comes Honawa,” Keok mumbled, and bent down to tie his shoelace.

On the drive back to the city, Bob said to Jesse. “You’re going on the Network march, ain’t you?”

“I’ll be there.”

“I got a tip that the city is planning to rough us up.”

“For what? Delivering a petition?”

“It shouldn’t be no surprise, considering who they are. Well, I for one ain’t no doormat. I’m coming prepared to defend myself. And to protect the ladies, if need be.”

“How do you plan to do that?”

“I’m toting a hawk. A billy. I don’t plan to pull it out unless I got to. If you want my advice, I suggest you bring one too. I got a few of them. I’ll slip you one.”

“Thanks for the tip, but I don’t need it.”

“Think about it. Bring a ski mask too, something to hide your mug if things gets rough.”

• • •

Late that night noises outside roused Cayatano from his dream. Distant barking of dogs. He climbed out from his tent and looked around. At first he saw nothing, then by the wood pile something moved. A large shape. Moonlight flashed in a pair of eyes. Then the shape faded into the shadows and was gone. Cayatano watched and waited a long time, saw nothing more, then went back to his sleeping bag.

It was still dark when he woke again, the first hints of dawn were just bursting over Orphan Mountain. He felt blessed to see the sunbeams, let himself be bathed in the light, breathing in its strength. He walked over to the wood pile and looked around.

In the desert clay were large paw prints. His first thought was wolf, *máitsoh*. It might be a good sign; the wolf can be an honored messenger, and can be called upon to heal and restore harmony. But wolves usually didn't frequent these parts. Maybe it was a big dog. And *máitsoh* can also be the form a person takes who plans to do evil. We better bring some dogs out here, he thought.

A little while later he set out walking. The air was still cool and crisp, but it soon began to heat up. After a half hour, at the slump of rocks, gravel and sand at the mountain's foot, alongside a tall cholla cactus with greenish yellow flowers, he stopped, hot and tired, and prayed for permission from the Holy People to ascend. His fatigue seemed to vanish. Beyond the talus where the shaft of the mountain began, up a twisting trail. As he walked, he felt himself becoming stronger; his feet barely touched the ground. He felt a reverberation. Elated, he looked up at the peak. A song seemed to come from the mountain itself, of great beauty, power, healing. Just below the mesa top, he burned sage, performed a ceremony and prayed again.

He stepped on top. The sun was high above the horizon, the air very clear. To the west, the twisting formations of Bisti Badlands; to the south he could almost see Chaco Canyon; to the north, Archuleta Mesa; to the east, Redondo Peak.

From a bank of clouds, two large bodies emerged, approaching too rapidly to be birds. He heard roaring in the air. Cayatano ducked behind a rock outcropping.

Helicopters. They flew overhead then circled the mesa. The chopping blades approached again. He watched the two large whirlybirds touch down on the mesa nearby. The doors opened, and out stepped a willowy white woman, a balding white man with a string tie, an Indian with glasses, other white men, all in business suits. Finally a barrel-chested Indian in a big hat. Latero.

The group strolled around the mesa, talking among themselves. Cayatano couldn't make out what they were saying.

Finally he stepped out and walked deliberately toward them. The group froze.

“Hello, Raymond,” Cayatano said to Latero.

Latero muttered stiffly, “What are you doing up here?”

“Just saying some prayers. How about you?”

“I’m here with this group of scientists.”

“I have to say, Raymond, it’s not right to bring helicopters onto Dzil Na’oodilii.”

“What could be wrong?”

“You know better than that. Can’t you feel it?”

“I assure you I consulted with several *hataalii* and they all said there would be no problem.”

“Who were these medicine men?” Cayatano asked.

“Well, I didn’t do that personally, it was done by my advisors. I’ll check with them. Call me at the office tomorrow.”

“Mr. Latero brought this scientific team here,” the woman cut in, “at my insistence. If there’s any problem, I take full responsibility. I know this is a special place for Navajos, that’s why I wanted to come.” She stuck out her hand. “Jean Parker from the Department of the Interior. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“Cayatano Azee.” He took her hand somewhat reluctantly.

“This is indeed a fortunate coincidence,” Latero jumped in. “Mr. Azee is considered a very important person on the reservation, and I was planning on bringing him into the loop regarding all the projects.”

“I’ll be glad to hear about them,” Cayatano said.

“But this isn’t the proper time or place. Come to my office. Just call my appointment secretary any time. I’m fully at your disposal. Well, we don’t want to interrupt your prayers any more. Seen enough everybody? Ready to go?”

They all said quickly: “I’m ready.” “Yes.” “Fine with me.”

“I want to reiterate,” the woman said to Cayatano, “that any inconvenience was my sole responsibility. I’m sure we will meet again, in a more appropriate venue.”

They beat a hasty retreat into the copters, whirled into the air, circled the peak, and distanced toward the east.

Inside the fuselage, the woman bit her lip. “How could you let that little man humiliate us like that?”

Dr Charlie shook his head. “I’m sorry, Jean, truly sorry. It will never happen again.”

“How could you let him face you all down?”

Latero carefully placed his hat in his lap. “You got to understand the power these medicine men have on the reservation. You don’t ever want them pointing at you; don’t get in their crosshairs. That guy is a diehard. If he gets all the medicine men up in arms, it’ll be a formidable force. We can handle him if we isolate him. But we have to do it carefully.”

“Have you tried hiring him as a consultant?”

“He turned me down.”

“Whatever your offer was, double it.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Zelia said aside to Claire, who was sitting next to her in the office, “Are you sure you don’t want somebody else to do this? You know I haven’t had much experience as meeting facilitator.” Glori was at her other side; Cayatano, Keechee, and Jimmy sat opposite.

“Don’t worry, you’ll do fine,” Claire replied. “I’ll be here if you need me to jump in.”

“So what’s the agenda?” Zelia was in khaki overalls, hair tied in a yellow kerchief.

“To begin, I’m going to give a financial report.”

“Saying what?” Glori asked.

“That our finances are no longer in crisis, that we can proceed at last with some of the projects that have been on hold, like fixing our plumbing and windows; giving some of the struggling collectives the loans they asked for; outreach aid from the Solidarity Fund to some very worthy causes, including Orphan Mountain, which Cayatano will be reporting on tonight. I’ll also have to say that we can’t do all those projects at the same time, we’ll need to set priorities.”

“Of course,” Glori added. “But a little money to spend is a luxury we haven’t enjoyed in a while.”

“Then I’ll tell everybody that this is all thanks to our new bookkeeper slash CFO Jeffrey Jagen.”

“Since we’re talking about him,” Glori interjected, “I got to say that there’s something about him that smells a little funny to me.”

“What?” Claire gazed at her quizzically.

“I’m just a suspicious old lady, but that guy is kind of

slippery, like an eel. He got a glib answer for everything. He just seems a little too good to be true.”

“At this point we have to trust him; we can’t afford not to,” Jimmy put in. “And if he turns out to be a mistake, it’ll all come out in the wash.”

“Let’s move on,” Claire said. “Next on the agenda is Orphan Mountain, the petition to the city council, and the march on city hall. Cayatano will give us an update on what is happening a hundred fifty miles from here out on the desert. And after that, Glori will update us on the petition and the march.”

“Before I speak tonight I’d like to smudge,” Cayatano said. “Do you think it would bother anybody?”

“The smoke?” Zelia asked. “Or the ceremony?”

“Either one.”

Keechee looked at Claire and Jimmy, and said, “Sage is a special kind of smoke. We burn it to purify ourselves and the room.”

“Some people are sensitive to smoke,” Claire responded.

“Then would anybody mind if we smudged now, before most of the people get here?” Cayatano asked.

“I need a good smudge,” Glori said.

Everyone glanced around at each other.

“I don’t think anybody is objecting,” Zelia said.

Keechee reached into his pack and pulled out an abalone shell and a bundle of sage tied with string, and handed it to Cayatano.

Cayatano stood, and the others instinctively stood with him.

“I first want to thank Creator,” Cayatano said, “for all of us, for bringing us all here today, keeping us strong and focused, guiding us all on this important mission along the good red road of spirit. All my relations.”

He lit the sage, blew on the smoldering, crackling leaves,

which flared for an instant until the glowing mass emitted spirals of white smoke. He waved the smoke over his head, rolled it down his arms, torso, legs, to the bottom of his feet, and around his back. "*Ahéhee shimásání, ahéhee shichei.* Thank you Grandmother, thank you Grandfather."

He handed the burning sage to Glori, who repeated the ceremony on herself, muttered, "*Mitakuye oyasín,*" and passed the conch shell to Zelia.

When they all finished smudging, Cayatano said to Keechee, "Take it and walk around the Warehouse, purify the space before the meeting."

Keechee left the room, holding the abalone shell with the smoldering smudge stick, and walked around the expansive, high-ceilinged room, spreading the smoke with his hands, sending it billowing upward.

A half hour later the Food Warehouse was packed with people, and more continued to arrive through the open truck doors on the loading dock. At the far end by the offices, all the pallets and boxes had been moved away, leaving a large open space. Three rows of chairs in concentric circles were filled with people, and others stood four deep behind them.

Zelia glanced over at Tochtli, took a deep breath and said in as loud a voice as she could muster, "Welcome to the All-Worker meeting. You know the procedures and consensus process. If we have take a straw vote on anything, only one delegate from each cooperative or collective. We've got a long agenda tonight, so we're going to jump right in. To begin, Claire is going to give us a financial report."

Claire ended her report with a gesture toward Jagen, who raised his hand to a round of applause. "Jeffrey is now bookkeeper for both the Food Warehouse and the Network. So we all expect clearer sailing ahead."

Zelia took over again. "Any questions? No? Next on the agenda is Orphan Mountain, the petition to the city council, and the march on city hall..."

Cayatano stood. “As many of you know, our traditional Navajo homeland, Dinétah, is surrounded by four sacred mountains. Blanca Peak to the east, Mount Taylor to the south, the San Francisco Peaks to the west, and Hesperus Peak to the north. We have our own names for them. But few outside of the Navajo people know about the mountain of the center, which we call Dzil Na’oodilii, and is also known as DZ or Orphan Mountain. DZ is not a recreation area. We don’t want people going out there and climbing it. DZ is a sacred spot, to us, the spiritual center of this entire region. I know some people cringe when they hear the word *spiritual*. But we’re here together in the Network because we’re trying to change our lives together, and to change the world into a better place. And we can do that only by raising our own consciousness and the consciousness of everyone else to a higher level, where we see that we are all interconnected, we all need each other, we all need the natural world and all living creatures in it, and that the prosperity for each of us depends on the prosperity of all. That is what spirituality is all about. So at heart, we are an economic movement, a political movement, an ecological movement, and above all a spiritual movement, a movement to bring ourselves and all the people to a higher consciousness. Here in the Network, we’re all members of collectives and cooperatives, myself included, which is a very advanced and ancient form of human organization, and we’re all here to raise our collective consciousness together by working together cooperatively and collectively. And to do that we need a spiritual center. For the Navajo people, and for all of us living here in this region, DZ is that center.”

Cayatano paused, looked around, then went on, “Our spiritual center, DZ, is under attack, and we need to protect it. It’s being taken over by the military, to build what they’re calling Orphan Scientific Tower. The only scientific part about it is their plan to use science to control all communications and dominate every person and thing in this region. They’re building a network of these towers around the country, because

their satellite networks don't work any more. But we're going to stop them. We've already got a hundred tents up at Orphan Mountain Camp, and more people are arriving every hour, from every direction. We're starting to gear up for the blockade, and we're asking you all to come out and camp with us. We've also put in a request for the Network to seed us with a little gas money. But mainly what we'll need at this point are bodies and minds, as many as we can bring out. And before the blockade, leading up to it, we've got this march tomorrow, to deliver our petition to the city council."

Bruce stood. "I move we approve the Orphan Mountain seed money by acclamation."

Zelia looked around the room. "Any discussion? None? Do you approve it?"

People around the room raised their thumbs.

"Anyone against? Stand asides?"

Zelia saw someone raise a tentative hand. "Henry? You're standing aside?"

"I actually do support it," he said. "But my contrarian nature rebels against any form of unanimity. So I officially stand aside."

"It's duly noted in the minutes," Barbara said. "Our resident curmudgeon stands aside."

Zelia went on, "OK, one stand aside. Blocks? Nobody? Then it's approved. Now Glori will explain what has happened with the petition."

Glori began, "The march is going to be a little different from what we planned. The reason is that our friends on the city council tell us they forgot to put us on the agenda."

Exclamations rose from around the crowd.

She went on, "I know many of you put in a lot of work getting all those signatures on the petition. We—the organizing committee—we contacted city council members Gomez and Sharpen four months ago, told them what we were doing, showed them the petition asking them to pass a resolution

supporting the Orphan Mountain blockade and opposing the construction of the prison tower. They promised it would be on the agenda, we shouldn't worry, they would take care of it. But now at the last minute they've changed their tune, it's not on the agenda, they said it fell through the cracks, it's too late now to put it on, and they can't talk about it at the meeting. This is the last time they meet before the tower construction and the blockade are scheduled to begin. In hindsight it looks like we were set up. But we're not going to be put off! We're going to bring that petition to them anyway, whether they like it or not! We're going to march up to city hall tomorrow night, disrupt their meeting if we have to, and deliver that petition. Our voice will be heard!"

Zelia said. "So how about it, folks?"

After the affirmations died down, Zelia continued, "Jimmy and Bruce are organizing logistics. Jimmy."

Jimmy began, "We're going to be mobilizing here in front of Network Central at six pm tomorrow. Spread the word, bring all your friends. Anybody who would like to be a march monitor, see me or Bruce after this meeting. If you can't make the march, meet us in front of city hall at seven."

"Another thing," Bruce added. "We've got a new Network banner. DZ surrounded by cooperative consciousness."

Several people unfurled the banner, about four feet high and over twelve feet long, with the mountain and rainbow blown up in the center.

Jimmy continued, "And tee shirts." He held one up. "Printed in our own Red Ink Co-op silkscreen studio. I wish we had enough for everybody in the Network, or everybody coming on the march. But I think they made enough for everybody here tonight. This is a giveaway."

Several people went around with boxes handing them out.

"While everybody gets a tee shirt, we're going to take a break," Zelia said. "We'll get back to the meeting in ten minutes." She turned to Claire and said in a low tone, "How'd I

do?”

Jesse heard a familiar voice behind him. “*Órale*, brother.”

He turned and faced Tochtli. “Good to see you here.”

“It’s been a while.”

“Did you get a tee shirt?”

“Not yet.”

“You better get one before they’re all gone.”

“I’ll get one later. I don’t like lines.”

“It’s awful noisy in here. Do you want to go outside for a few minutes and talk?”

“About something in particular?”

“Just to check in.”

They slipped through the crowded room, out to the loading dock, and sat on the metal stairs. It was a beautiful warm night.

“Are you going to be staying out at the camp?” Tochtli asked.

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Me too. I’m scrambling to put together some camping gear. I used to have everything, but most of it’s still back in Arizona.”

“I might be able to lend you some.”

From around the corner a group of uniformed men appeared, followed by several people with cameras, and at rear guard, a cluster of cops.

Jesse and Tochtli both instinctively rose to their feet.

The group stopped at the foot of the stairs.

“Can we help you?” Jesse asked.

“Building inspectors. Move out of the way. We’ve got reports of violations.”

Tochtli said, “You can’t do this now. We’ve got a meeting going on.”

“Come back in the morning,” Jesse added sharply.

“Get out of the way. Do you want us to shut this whole building down?” They quickly mounted the stairs, stepping past them. One of the people with cameras gingerly muttered, “Press.”

Jesse and Tochtli stood there for an instant, stunned. Then Jesse wrenched himself together. He dashed after the intruders, pushed past them, burst into the crowd and shouted, “We’re being raided!”

Four police officers stepped into the center of the circle. One declared, in a loud voice, “This is an illegal assembly. Disperse peacefully.” The inspectors, shining flashlights, broke into twos and spread out around the room. The reporters’ cameras flashed. Shouting, people running in every direction.

The cops gathered into a small circle facing outward, tapping their billy clubs. Suddenly a crate came flying through the air, hit the concrete floor at their feet, exploded open, lettuce flying in every direction. The police pulled their guns. “Everybody on your knees, on the floor!”

The raid ended in eleven arrests and the discovery of numerous code violations. Both the Network and the Warehouse offices were ransacked, files and computers taken.

As soon as the inspectors and police finally left, a small group gathered in the ransacked offices, and began picking things up from the shambles on the floor. Claire sat at the desk, leafing through a pile of official papers the inspectors had left. Bruce kept calling the Network lawyer, but couldn’t get through.

Cayatano’s phone rang. It was Keok, calling from Fire House, where he’d stayed as security.

“Fire House has just been raided,” Keok said. “They sacked the office, tore everything upside down, seized all the computers and files. There was nothing we could do.”

Claire shook her head. “These notices say we have ten days



to comply with the violations or they'll shut the building down.”

Work stopped as Bruce finally got through to the Network lawyer. The others listened attentively to their voices over the speakerphone. Finally he hung up, and said, “You heard her. Our lawyer says this is bogus, just harassment. What they did is illegal. We still have one or two rights in this country. They'll have to return our files eventually. This won't come to anything, as long as we don't let them intimidate us. Come on. The lawyer's going to meet us down there. Let's go bail them out.”

“If they think this is going to stop us,” Glori said, “they don't know who they're dealing with.”

• • •

Jesse found himself handcuffed in the police carrier with the others, next to Barbara and Jimmy, and across from Jack and Bob.

At the station, they were booked, the women and men separated.

A jailer appeared at the holding cell and grunted, “MacConnail, come with me.”

When hours passed and Jesse didn't return, the others started to get antsy.

“Maybe they just moved him somewhere else,” Jack said to Bob. “I hope he's OK.”

Bob responded in a low voice, “They've probably got him singled out, working him over. I wouldn't want to be in his boots.”

“Why would they single him out?”

“I shouldn't say this.”

“What?”

Bob leaned forward. “Jesse threw that crate. That's what somebody told me. You never heard this from me.”

Not long after, the group from the Network bailed them all out.

“What happened to Jesse?” Meru asked. “Wasn’t he with you?”

“He was with us at first,” Jimmy responded. “Then they separated him from the rest of us. And nobody’s seen him since.”

“At the desk they said they had no arrest record of him.”

“That’s impossible. He was with us. He got booked with the rest of us.”

“Something funky is going on.”

On the way back in one of the Network vans, Claire asked Bruce, who was driving, “Did you find out who threw that crate?”

“Nobody’s come forward yet. Apparently nobody saw it happen. Everybody was too busy looking at the cops. Whoever did it is either an idiot or working with the cops. Either way, he deserves to get his ass kicked out of the Network.”

Jack and Bob glanced at each other, but neither said anything.

• • •

They brought Jesse into a small windowless room and sat him at a table, similar to the one where was interrogated after the fire. The same waiting.

Finally a man in a suit entered, sat facing him.

“Your choices are very limited, MacConnail. For your sake, I hope you’ll make the right choice. I’ll be blunt. You’re facing life in prison, with no chance of parole.”

“For what?”

“We know you planted that IED in the factory.”

“I didn’t!”

“Just between you and me, MacConnail, that’s irrelevant. The D.A. is up for reelection and needs arrests and convictions. He doesn’t really care about much beyond that. He just wants somebody with a record—a known bad guy—to pin it on. Now you’re in a very ambiguous situation. I happen to be privy to interesting information about your file. You have a long history of offenses. And yet our computers show that you have no record at all. How could that be? There are only two possible answers: a computer glitch or you have friends in high places. If it’s friends who are keeping you from doing hard time, then it would probably be in your best interest to maintain those friendships. Am I right?”

Jesse said nothing.

“I’ll come right to the point. Your girlfriend, Zelia Mayrhofen, is in the inner circle of both the Co-op Network and the Orphan Mountain Defense Committee.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Let’s not play games.”

“We broke up.”

“Couples are always breaking up and coming back together. It’s an unfortunate symptom of the time. Let’s just suppose for a minute that you two love birds kiss and make up.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Almost nothing. Just occasional information about your girlfriend’s associates.”

“What associates?”

“Do I have to be specific? Ones in Fire house, INUF, the Co-op Network, the Orphan Mountain Defense Committee, the Collective League, the Revolutionary Alliance, the San Patricios, and a few others. We want you to get more involved with some of these groups.”

“And what will you do for me in exchange?”

“To begin with, your record will remain cleansed. You will be removed from the prime suspect list for the IED. You and your family back in Worcester will be spared a brutal and humiliating trial. You will not have to go to prison for the rest of your life. And finally, you will be financially rewarded far beyond anything you could possibly earn building wooden boxes.”

Jesse said nothing.

“Think about it.” The man stood and left.

Ten minutes later, a cop opened the door, led Jesse out to the desk, where they returned his wallet, change, keys, and pocket knife. “You’re free to go.”

“What about the others?”

“If I were you, I’d just worry about myself, consider myself very lucky, go on home.”

• • •

Late at night, Jack and Tracy were in bed.

“What’s wrong, baby? The lawyer said you don’t need to worry, they’ll drop all charges.”

“It’s not that. Just something I heard when I was in the holding cell.”

“What?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why can’t you tell me?”

“It’s just something you’re probably better off not knowing.”

“We can tell each other anything. I tell you everything. You’re safe with me.”

“Jesse threw that crate,” Jack blurted. “That’s what somebody said.”

“That’s not possible,” Tracy replied. “Who told you that?”

Jack hesitated, then muttered, "Bob from the woodshop."

"That's a friend of his, I think."

"Bob didn't say he actually saw Jesse do it. He said that's what somebody else told him."

"Jesse didn't do it. He was standing next me the whole time. Besides, he's the only one they released without charges."

"The whole thing is pretty strange, isn't it?"

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Everyone was gearing up for the mobilization and march. Many of the shops in Network Central closed for the day. The halls were pulsing with talk and activity. The marchers had taken over a large space in the Food Warehouse, making signs.

Videos of the police raid had been featured in the local news. While the police had brought the local news media along to publicly shame the Network, it probably backfired. The Co-op Network and Fire House had many friends and supporters, who were mobilized into action by the videos, and large numbers were turning out to help.

Jesse had signed up to be a march monitor, and was looking forward to it, but the crate incident was still hanging over his head, so he didn't feel very sociable. Instead of making signs, he went to the woodshop, where he was alone. He found woodworking calming and meditative. He began milling some red birch boards, when Bruce entered and strode up to him. Jesse turned off the machine and took out one ear plug.

"They want to talk with you in the Network office."

Bruce accompanied him over there. Jimmy, Glori, Claire, and Keok were waiting.

"Sit down," said Jimmy.

Jesse complied. They all looked at him.

Bruce said, "Word been going around that you threw that crate."

"They're mistaken. It wasn't me. Who said that?"

Jimmy jumped in, "Why did the police book you, then suddenly there's no record of your arrest, and then let you go?"

Jesse almost tried to explain what had happened, but he

really didn't understand it himself, it was all so shady, it would probably just convince them of their worst suspicions. Instead he said, "I have no idea."

"I'll be straightforward with you," Jimmy continued. "We think a provocateur threw that crate. We think they have informants in the Network."

Bruce picked up, "We can't take any more chances. We're probably going to ask a few people to leave."

"Just understand, and understand good," Glori said, "that we're keeping our eye on you. We're not accusing you of anything. Just watch you're step."

"How could you think I would do something like that? I'm your daughter's friend."

"Don't pull that shit with me," Glori said. "That don't mean nothing here."

Keok folded his arms. "Maybe we should take him to another location. The Fire Sticks know how to deal with snitches."

Claire jumped in, "No, that's not necessary at this point."

"I like you, Jesse," Bruce said, "but maybe you should take a leave of absence from the woodshop until we straighten this out."

. . .

Jesse was too morose to go back to work. He was getting paranoid. People he passed in the halls of Network Central eyed him suspiciously, or so he thought. He had to clear this up once and for all.

But he didn't know how to do that. He had signed up to be a march monitor, but now he wondered if they even wanted him there. Instead of joining the group preparing for the march, he decided to go for a walk.

He meandered around, and found himself heading, more by instinct than by design, toward the river. He reached the bridge, looked down into the lazy, inexorable muddy water for a while, thought of the journey the water was making, where it was coming from, where it was going. Then he followed a trail that led down to the bank, and sat on a rock near the edge.

Finally he realized that the day had slipped away. It was getting late. He was far from Network Central. He had to get back for the mobilization.

After a long trek he arrived back at the Warehouse, but by that time the marchers had already left. He followed their route toward civic center plaza.

When Jesse finally approached the plaza, the sidewalks and streets were crowded, spilling over, cars at a standstill. It was a great turn out, much larger than he'd expected.

Civic center was jammed, more demonstrators arriving every minute. Numerous banners and signs. PROTECT ORPHAN MOUNTAIN, ALL LIFE IS SACRED, COLLECTIVIZE THE COMMONS. A loud marching band.

Jesse looked around for Meru, but didn't see her.

"Buddy, I been looking for you." It was Bob.

"And I've been wanting to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About what happened in the police station.

"Let's go somewhere a little more private."

Bob led Jesse into a narrow side street, where there were several trucks parked.

In the shadow of one of the trucks, Bob said, "I been thinking about you, man. I don't want to see you hurt. I got something for you. I brought you some protection." From the back of his pants he pulled out a short bat, a billy club. "Just stick it in the back of your jeans there, and tuck your shirt in over it."



“Bob, I don’t want it. There’s been a rumor floating around the Network that I threw that crate.”

“I heard that, I didn’t believe it. I would never believe anything I heard about you that I know isn’t true, brother.”

“Who said it to you?”

“First? I’m not sure. I heard it from a bunch of people. Everybody’s been talking about it.”

“Just tell me the truth, Bob.”

“OK, I’ll tell you who I think spread that rumor. But not now.”

“Why not now?”

“It’s a long conversation. There’s too much going on now.”

“Then there’s that business of your friends clearing my record. The cop who questioned me knew it had been wiped off the files, and they tried to use that to recruit me.”

“Recruit you? For what?”

“To be a snitch. And they threatened to hang the factory fire on me.”

“I hope you called those bastards’ bluff.”

“I just kept my mouth shut.”

“Good. Let them think whatever they want to think. Let’s get together later and talk about it more. For now, take this.” He shoved the bat at Jesse. “Take it. Stick it in the back of your pants. Nobody’ll know it’s there, you’ll have it if you’ll need it to protect yourself or somebody else. Maybe your girlfriend. And here’s something else to go with it.”

“What’s that?”

“A ski mask. If things get rough, slip it on. It will help you survive. Here. Take it.”

He shoved the bat and mask at Jesse again.

As soon as Jesse held them in his hand, he regretted it.

Bob poked him with his elbow. “Now let’s get back to the

action, compañero.”

Jesse stuck the mask in his back pocket and the bat into the back of his jeans, tightened his belt a notch, and followed Bob back to the rally.

Bob immediately slipped into the crowd. Jesse tried to focus on the demonstration, but felt estranged, distracted. Why had he taken that club? There was no way he would use it. Was he that weak? He could feel the club in the small of his back, and the bulk of the mask in his back pocket. He wanted to pull them out and toss them in the gutter. Yet he didn't. It was disturbing, yet comforting. He told himself that there were too many people around, he didn't want anybody to see him throwing them away. But it was more than that. Part of him didn't want to let them go, some fragile part of him was addicted to the danger, the rush and release of his own rage.

He saw Jack and Tracy near the fountain, threaded his way to them. They each had a multi-colored ribbon tied around one arm.

Jack greeted him. “You didn't show up at monitor training.”

“I got sidetracked,”

“Anyway, here's your arm band.” He tied a ribbon around Jesse's upper arm.

“I don't know if they still want me. They think I'm not trustworthy.”

Tracy cut in, “If it's because of those rumors that you threw the crate, I know they're not true. You were standing next to me when it came flying. I can vouch for you.”

“I wish you would tell that to Glori and Bruce and Jimmy and Claire.”

“I'll be glad to.”

“Why would somebody spread that lie about me?”

“Maybe somebody's trying to set you up,” Jack replied.

“For what?”

“To distract attention from themselves.”

“Where did you hear about it?”

“Back in the holding cell,” Jack said, “right after we were arrested.”

“From who?”

“From Bob. Let’s talk more about it later. Right now we have a job to do as monitors.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Just try to keep things from getting out of hand.”

“What if there’s trouble?”

“Look for the Fire Sticks, red armbands. Keok’s in charge.”

Jesse circulated through the crowd. He saw Meru near the foot of the steps to city hall, along with the group of organizers, and threaded his way to her.

“Where have you been?” She was obviously angry.

“I went down to the river.”

“Instead of coming on the march? Why? I’ve been looking for you all day!”

“I just fell into a funk. I’m sorry, honey.”

“You shouldn’t do that! Screw your head on straight! Everybody was worried.”

“I didn’t know if they even wanted me on the march. I was feeling bad. They think I’m a fink.”

“Who does?”

“They all do. Your mom. The whole continuity committee. They pulled me into the office this afternoon and gave me the third degree.”

She put her arms around him. “I’m sorry, babe. I heard about it. But that’s over. A lot of people came forward later and stood up for you.”

“So your mom doesn’t still think I’m a rat?”

“She actually likes you. A little. They’ve still got questions about what happened to you at the police station, but at least they know you didn’t throw that crate.”

“So who did it?”

Before Meru had a chance to answer, Glori, who was standing on the steps nearby, said in a loud voice, ““Mic check!”

The crowd around her echoed, “Mic check.”

She stood at the foot of the marble stairway into city hall, with Claire, Jimmy, Bruce, Cayatano, and Keechee, surrounded by a circle of Fire Sticks security, including Keok, all wearing DZ tee shirts. At the top of the stairs, in front of the entry doors, was a line of police with helmets and batons.

“I’ve got to stand by Mom,” Meru said to Jesse. She squeezed his hand, and made her way to the line of speakers.

“You all know why we’re here.”

“You all know why we’re here,” the crowd repeated.

Since they had no sound system or sound permit, they were amplifying the speaker’s words by the technique called *people’s microphone*.

“In a few minutes, we’re going up those steps...”

The crowd echoed, “up those steps...”

“... into the city council meeting, to deliver our petition, with over eleven thousand signatures, demanding that the council take a stand to protect Orphan Mountain, which we also call DZ, from the forces that want to turn a sacred spot into a military base, just like they did to all those hollowed-out mountains east of the city. And this is a struggle for even more than that. Because DZ embodies the life-sustaining power of the people, and the military tower embodies the death culture of the corporate oligarchy. But whether or not the city council takes a stand, whether or not the politicians, the elected officials who are supposed to represent us, whether or not they stand with us or betray every value that the people hold dear, we are going to stand strong.”

After the people's microphone finished repeating her last phrase so those in the back could hear it, Cayatano stepped forward. "In a few days, construction of the tower is scheduled to begin," he said.

The people's microphone repeated, "...is scheduled to begin."

Cayatano continued, "Our people are out there, in Orphan Mountain Camp, hundreds of them, with our good friend Dega Honawa from INUF, preparing a welcome for the construction convoy, a welcoming blockade. Tomorrow and the days following, we are going to join them out there. We will not let those trucks pass. We will not permit them up on DZ. We are going to stop them in their tracks. They are going to have to get past us. We want you all to join with us there to blockade the military takeover. Car pooling and vans to Orphan Mountain will be leaving daily from Network Central, coordinated by the Co-op Network and Fire House."

Jimmy said, "This is the petition, with over eleven thousand signatures." He and Claire lifted two large boxes above their heads, to a round of applause.

"We have an inalienable human right," Claire took up, "to petition our government for redress of grievances. They are trying to deny us that right, but we are claiming that right today, and we will not be denied."

Cayatano continued, "If you agree with what we're doing, as we climb the steps, we want everyone to shout your agreement, as loud as you can. And don't stop shouting until they let us in."

"We're just going to make so much noise," Bruce said, "that we will make it impossible for them to continue with their business-as-usual meeting."

Glori said, "Let the band begin!"

The marching band had been quiet during the speeches. Now the drummer gave several blasts on the large bass drum he carried with shoulder brackets, and the rest of the band, with trombones, saxophones, a sousaphone, and a motley assortment

of percussion and noisemakers, struck up a loud anthem.

Glori turned, the others turned with her, to face the stairs, at the top of which stood the row of police, and behind them the doors. Glori linked arms with Cayatano and Bruce, while Claire and Jimmy followed directly behind them carrying the petitions, flanked by Keechee and Meru. Step by step they climbed until they were face to face with the row of cops.

“We’ve come to deliver a petition to the city council,” Glori said. “Let us pass.”

The cop in the center, who appeared to be in charge, replied, “By order of the city manager, the council chamber is closed to the public.”

“We’ve come by order of a higher power, our inalienable rights. Let us pass.”

“Disperse peacefully or face the consequences. This is an order.”

“We cannot leave without delivering this petition,” Cayatano said.

Just then, one of the doors opened, a thin, nervous man emerged, spoke some hurried words with the central cop, then disappeared back inside.

The cop turned to the group again and said, “Two of you will be permitted inside.”

Glori said, “Jimmy, Claire. It’s your moment to shine.”

The two of them, carrying the boxes, disappeared into city hall. A roar went up from the crowd, followed by wild applause.

Glori turned to the crowd again. “Mic check!”

The crowd echoed, “Mic check!”

“We don’t know how long Claire and Jimmy are going to be up there with the city council. We’ll hear their report when they come down. Now, while we’re waiting to hear back from them, we’re going to party in the street.”

The band stuck up a lively tune, people began to dance.

Something caught Tochtli's eye. A group of people slipping out of two vans parked down an alley. He stepped closer to get a better look. They were all dressed in black, with ski masks covering their faces, carrying baseball bats. Tochtli didn't recognize any of them.

Suddenly they rushed down the block, smashing the windshields of cars and hurling rocks through store windows.

From around several different corners, a fleet of police vans screeched into the plaza, sirens wailing; three helicopters suddenly whirred overhead. Squadrons of police with rifles, batons, gas masks and face-shields appeared from every direction.

Police charged, swinging batons; people were running, stumbling, falling, scattering in every direction; the air was filled with screaming, smoke, teargas, gunfire.

People tripped and fell, sprawling on the pavement all around. It was turning into a panic, a stampede. A falling woman grabbed onto Tracy, pulled her down. Jack knelt to help her, but a group plowed into him. Piles of hurt people were slumped and moaning all over the street.

Jack held Tracy with alarm, covering her body with his. *We're getting trampled*, he thought. Tracy felt a terrible crunch in her abdomen, cramping pain, looked down, her pants were dark and wet. "I think I'm having a miscarriage!"

In another part of the chaos, Glori snapped angrily at Keok, "Why are those Fire Sticks just running around in circles, instead of stopping that black bloc?"

"Their job is to protect the marchers, not fight the black bloc."

"They've got to be stopped. They're provocateurs!"

"The damage has already been done," Keok said. "We need to clear the plaza and regroup."

"You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?"

"How can you say that?"

“I’m through playing cat and mouse with you. I know who you are.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t you know our people would track you down?”

Keok’s face dropped. “This is ridiculous.”

“You haven’t got a drop of Native blood in you, Jerex Foster,” Glori said.

With a swift movement, Keok grasped her wrist and twisted. Excruciating pain shot up her arm. He held her tightly against his body. “Come along,” he whispered, “or your shoulder is broken.”

“Go fuck yourself,” she said.

Keok forced a clenched-teeth smile as he led her through the panicked crowd.

As they turned down an alley, Jesse was standing nearby, trying somehow to help the crowd disperse. Something looked wrong. He followed and came up behind them. “Glori, Keok, where are you going? Are you OK?”

Keok wheeled, and as he did, Glori kned him in the groin.

Jesse was stunned.

Keok doubled over in pain, dropped his hold on her for an instant, winced and cursed, then tried to grab her again.

Jesse instinctively went for Keok.

Keok punched him in the face, sending him sprawling.

Jesse lay dazed for an instant in the street, then looked up.

Keok was leading Glori quickly away again.

Jesse felt immobilized. Thoughts blew through his mind so hard and fast that he couldn’t hold onto them, thoughts of all the violence he had ever done or seen. It was as if there was a door deep within his chest, that held all the violence of the universe, all the violence inside him. He had sworn off ever using violence again, and here he was again. He grasped the



handle; if he opened the door, parts of himself that he feared and hated the most, would be let loose, repercussions of his own destruction. He didn't know what to do.

Suddenly he snapped himself out of it, spurted after them, leaped onto Keok's back. Keok threw him off like a child. Jesse fell hard, then remembered he still had the bat tucked into the back of his pants, and pulled it out.

Keok dropped Glori and came at him. Jesse braced, bat in his hand. Keok kicked him in the chest, Jesse swung the bat, Keok deftly dodged it, grabbed his arm, wrestled it out of his hand, kicked him in the face, unleashed a rain of quick blows as Jesse fell. Jesse rolled into a ball. Keok stood over him, kicking him.

Keok felt a tremendous shock on the back of his neck, collapsed to his knees. Glori stood over him, holding the bat. "Get your sorry ass out of here."

He climbed to his feet, eyes narrowed, muttered, "You're dead." Just as he was about to lash out at her again, he saw Tochtli, Lorenzo, and Hector racing toward them.

Then a shrill whistle, two cops in riot gear.

Keok froze, then panicked, and took off down the block. He disappeared around the corner into the crowd, Tochtli, Lorenzo, and Hector following.

Jesse was in shock, but pain was already beginning to throb through his body.

Instead of following the runners, the cops stopped and stood over him. One cop picked up the bat, which Glori had dropped. The other cop rifled Jesse's pockets, pulled out the ski mask.

"Rioter scum. This is going to put you away for along time." He twisted Jesse's hands behind his back, began to handcuff him.

Tochtli plowed into the standing cop from behind, knocking him into the cop who was kneeling over Jesse.

As the two cops scrambled to their feet, Tochtli, Lorenzo, and Hector jumped in and out around them, taunting. One cop swung his baton, but hit only air; the other lunged at them with his stun gun. Tochtli, Lorenzo, and Hector danced backward down the block, taunting them, and the cops took chase.

Jesse felt people helping him to his feet. It was Meru and Glori. Leaning on them, he staggered away.

“We’ve got to get him to the emergency room,” Meru said, “He’s hurt.”

“They’ll just arrest him if we take him there,” Glori said. “We’ll take him to the medical truck. If he needs more help, we’ll transport him to Network Central, our doctors and medics are ready over there.”

When they arrived at the medical truck, they found a long line. Tracy was lying on a cot inside the van, surrounded by medics, with Jack stroking her head. Zelia and Tochtli were waiting nervously outside. Occasionally Zelia burst into spasmodic sobs, then pulled herself back together.

Instead of waiting, Meru and Glori took Jesse to Network Central. They had turned the Warehouse into a clinic. Injured people were lying and sitting everywhere, moaning.

As soon as they were able, the medics moved Tracy to a nearby friendly doctor’s office that was better equipped. She lay on the examination table there, under a blanket, with Jack holding her, and wept until she had no tears left.

Jesse slept for a while. When he woke, he ached and was badly bruised, but realized that overall he wasn’t in too bad shape, others were a lot worse.

A group gathered in the office and tried to sort through what had happened.

When Glori told them about Keok, most still couldn’t believe it.

“Our people saw through his phony papers, traced him back to Manila. His father was military intelligence, his mom what

they call a camp follower, and the apple don't fall far from the tree, do it? He took off so fast, I doubt we'll ever see him again."

"So he wasn't even Indian?" Bruce asked.

"We found out he was even wearing colored contact lenses to cover his blue eyes. There was only one part of his story that was true, he did try to enroll as a Kaw or an Osage as a cover, and they both turned him down."

"Honawa is going to be the most shaken of all," Cayatano said.

"Don't the phones work out there at camp?" Claire asked.

"This is not something to talk about over the phone."

"So where do we go from here?" Jimmy asked.

Cayatano responded, "They must think this is the end. But it's not. Tomorrow we're going to motorcade to Orphan Mountain Camp, just like we planned. Those of us who still have the grit to carry on."

Keechee took a deep breath, drew his shoulders back. "We've got to pull ourselves together and regroup overnight."

Glori said, "We've just begun."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Orphan Mountain Camp was bustling with activity. More people were continually arriving, oriented by the welcoming committee on how to walk softly on the land. A town of tents and shade shelters made of sticks and brush, spread out over the high desert, all with entrances facing east, to catch the dawn. Out of wood, rocks, and clay, they built male and female medicine hogans, and two sweat lodges, blessed them with corn pollen. Most of the natural materials were brought in from far mountains, to impact the site as little as possible.

In the central fire pit, the firemen, including Jesse, took turns tending the fire, making sure it never went out while the camp was in progress.

Each day began with an intertribal sunrise ceremony; meals were communal affairs around the fire pit, with great cauldrons of soup, and large pans, skillets, and woks of stir fried vegetables made from truckloads of produce from the Food Warehouse.

Cayatano and Honawa sat in one of the shade shelters outside the male Hogan.

“Are you OK?” Cayatano asked.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t look OK.”

“You got to understand, Cayatano, I may be a tough old bird, but Keok was like a son to me. Now it’s almost like I don’t know who to trust or what to believe. Suddenly I’m a lot more suspicious of everybody. Even you. I can’t help it. It was a very deep shock.”

“You’ll get over it soon enough. You got a pretty sharp eye,

but it's probably not the first time you were fooled."

"You're right, time's the great healer. I've learned that. I can feel the pain's already fading. But each time you're burned there's a little more scar tissue. But we don't have time to dwell on that. We've got more important things to deal with. Let's move on."

Cayatano pulled out his notebook. "I've been looking down the punch list, and other than a few details, everything is pretty much in place."

"There's one important thing I'm starting to get concerned about," Honawa said "So far it's a good turnout, except that only a few Navajos have come out."

"The Diné are out there," Cayatano replied. "Watching us very closely, to see what we're made of, our resolve. Before they stick their necks out, the Navajos want to be sure we don't just fade away if things get rough, and leave them holding the bag."

"Something else I got to tell you. Last night the dogs were very upset, barking and howling for hours. In the morning we found the body of one of them with its belly torn apart."

Just then, a middle-aged Navajo woman, accompanied by two others approached.

"Carmen, *woshdée*," Cayatano said.

"Good evening, Cayatano, Mr Honawa."

"Good evening, Mrs Tsosie. Please call me Dega," Honawa said.

"And you can call me Carmen."

"You're looking well," Cayatano said. "I hope you've been feeling better."

"Yes, I'm almost entirely cured. Thanks so much to you, Hastiin Cayatano."

After a few more pleasantries, Carmen said, "But I have come with other distressing news. Raymond refuses to give up his position as acting chair. He's surrounded himself with a

small group of cohorts, they've taken over the chapter by manipulating certain technicalities, based on spurious innuendoes against me. I'm appealing to the Nation but, as you know, they act very slow, and by the time they do anything, the tower will be unstoppable."

"If we have you working with us, Carmen, we'll be OK, even without the powers of the chapter chair."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Talk to as many of the local people as you can, explain what we're doing. People around here have enormous respect for you. If anybody can bring them out, you can."

"I will certainly try, Hastiin Cayatano. One more thing. I see you have wonderful vegetable stews that you are serving to all the committee members camping with you. But something is missing. This is Navajo land, Dinétah, and when you are among the people, you need to include sheep. So I have brought you mutton for some of your stews."

. . .

Later in the day Cayatano drove his old pickup to Nageezi, a small settlement about ten miles down the road for some supplies. At the general store he ran into a few people he knew, one of whom mentioned that parked down the road toward Chaco Canyon was a fleet of trucks and road construction equipment. They had appeared that morning, and must have been brought in over night, but nobody seemed to know where they came from or why they were there. Cayatano decided to investigate. He found them about five miles further down, in the middle of nowhere in particular, a number of closed box trucks and a series of large transport trailers loaded with graders, bulldozers, rollers, other road-building machines. A guard sat in a car with a light on top of the cab, listening to loud music on the radio.

As soon as Caytano passed them, in his rear mirror he saw a car coming up quickly behind him. As it approached, it flashed its lights, signaling it wanted him to stop. He decided not to. The other car came up right behind, tailgating him. He spun onto a narrow side road. He knew the road, and had driven it before. It went up Chaco Mesa. It was very rough and circled back a few miles further on.

The car continued after him. Down through a small wash, turning behind some rocks. On the other side he saw that he was alone, the car hadn't followed. He continued driving until he circled back to the main road again. He saw the other car parked there, a man leaning against it, Latero.

Cayatano drove up to him. "Raymond." He spoke through the open window.

Latero grinned. "Yá'át'ééh. How are you, Cayatano?"

"Busy as usual."

"Don't I know it. Me too. Always too much to do. I guess it keeps us out of trouble."

"How come you were following me like that?"

"I just wanted to talk to you about something."

"About what?"

"I hear they're having a squaw dance, a *ndá*, over by Sash Wash, are you planning on going?"

"I'd like to, but I got too much else to do."

"I know what you mean. I been planning to get over there and socialize too but, you know, business comes first."

"What is this something you want to talk to me about?"

"Look, a group of bigwigs are coming out here to tour around the tower site tomorrow. We want you to join us, meet some of them, they're good contacts."

"I'm not interested."

"If you knew more about it, maybe you wouldn't be so negative. This is going to be good for the entire Navajo nation."

“How?”

“It’s is going to bring in millions. It’ll pay for schools, roads, water, everybody’s going to benefit.”

“You mean a few dollars are going to trickle down from the holes in your pockets.”

“When will you stop being so hard headed, Cayatano? You see everything as some kind of plot. We’re not your enemy, just open your mind a little, come on board.”

“It’s not right to bring the military in here.”

“When are you going to stop fighting this? You’re living in a world that doesn’t exist any more. You’re going to wind up in a tumbledown hogan with a few starving sheep, while the rest of us have all the good things in life. This is your opportunity: join us or be left behind.”

“If living the way the Holy People taught us is my punishment for being a Navajo, then this stupid old man is just going to have to make the best of it.”

Cayatano drove off. The sun was approaching the tops of the Chuska mountains and the desert taking on a wonderful stillness.

A large shape dashed into the road right in front of him, a big dog. Cayatano hit the brake, swerved off into the desert and came to a stop a few feet from some bushes and rocks. He didn’t see the animal anywhere now, it must have run off into the brush. He put the gear in reverse; the wheels spun, it was a bed of soft sand. He tried rocking but it dug in. He got out of the pickup. It was just one wheel that was in bad; if he could stick something hard underneath he could get enough traction to pull out. He saw some flat rocks, wedged a couple under the tire. He started the engine again, hit the gear, but the wheel just spun and dug in deeper.

The sun was almost touching the mountains, in another ten minutes it would be gone. Out on the desert he saw a structure he hadn’t noticed before, a house. He fumbled in his glove



compartment, found the signal mirror he always carried. He caught the last rays of sunlight in the mirror and flashed them to the structure. If anyone saw it they would return the signal, that was the custom. He kept signaling until the sun was completely gone, but there was no response.

The night air was cool and refreshing, there was no moon yet but it was very clear and light. He knew the moon was a little past full, and would be up soon.

He grasped his flashlight, got out of the truck, walked a ways toward the structure, then thought he heard a noise behind him, turned and was startled by a dark shape, the animal, standing between him and his truck. He shined the flashlight in its eyes, it looked almost like a wolf. He picked up a stone and pretended to throw it, but the animal didn't flinch, its ears were back and tail down, he didn't like the way it looked.

Through the corner of his eye he saw a scrub greasewood tree. There were usually dead branches lying around, very hard and dry. He backed toward it and the animal stepped with him, keeping the same distance. He bent quickly, picked up a branch about an inch thick and two feet long.

He had never seen an animal out here quite like this one. There were very few wolves in these parts. He tried to circle around so he could get back to the truck, but the animal moved with him, baring its teeth and emitting a low growl.

He decided it would be better to continue on to the building. Maybe he could find shelter there. He backed slowly toward it, the dark shape following him.

It wasn't a house but the ruin of an ancient Anasazi building. He was much further up on Chaco Mesa than he thought. He must have lost his bearings. Most of the Chaco ruins were down in the canyon, but there were a few here on top, at the meeting point of ancient roads. He didn't want to go inside, it was open and had no roof, it would give him no protection, and the residues left by the dead would weaken him.

He shined the light into the animal's face, its eyes looked wild, there was foam in the corners of its mouth. He backed toward the ruin, the animal moved with him, snarling menacingly. He shook the greasewood branch at it but the animal stood its ground. With every step he took backward, the animal came forward, it was stalking him. There was something about it that seemed abnormal, he needed to prevent any direct contact. He fumbled in his medicine bundle, and fished out a piece of turquoise and a flake of flint.

He backed out onto a ridge between arroyos, a mesa top overlooking Chaco Canyon, a hundred feet down. He saw a foot trail, followed it walking backwards along the canyon rim, the animal staying with him. This continued for a hundred yards, it was playing a waiting game, trying to tire him.

The animal trotted off in a circle and came up on his other side snarling, staring, its small eyes clouded over. It inched toward him, and he backed off the trail toward the canyon rim.

Without warning it lunged and snapped at him. He swung the branch but it missed, the creature backed off then came at him again, jaws open, lunging then backing off. Cayatano whipped the greasewood branch wildly in its face but it always stayed inches away, teeth bared, growling. He saw the canyon rim behind him, he couldn't retreat any more.

He found himself singing:

*'Ene'yaa ya'éine yaaiyééé*

*'Ayé'e'ye*

Suddenly it leaped, Cayatano hit it hard in the face with the greasewood branch, and as he did he felt as if he was holding forked lightning. The animal careened backward, emitting a loud yelp and whine, blood dripping from its mouth and nose. Then it rushed toward him again, snarling ferociously. He swung the greasewood and landed a powerful blow on its neck. The force of impact sent it reeling to the left and Cayatano stumbling to the right. It leaped at him again. Cayatano rolled away and in one motion came up under its belly with the

greasewood branch, and sent it flying toward the canyon rim. Its footing slipped out from under it and the animal disappeared over the edge.

Cayatano slowly recovered. He stumbled his way back to his truck, rocketed the engine, jumped out of the ruts, and drove hurriedly back to camp.

He parked in the usual place, sat in the cab. His eyelids drooped and he fell into a deep asleep. When he awoke, early morning light was just beginning to glow. He thought about last night's events, and was no longer sure if it really happened or if it was *ndiishgaash*, a bad dream. He didn't tell anyone about it.

• • •

With his laser pen, Keok pointed at the satellite pictures on the large screen, as Jagen, Bob, Dr Charlie, and Jean Parker, from the Department of the Interior, watched attentively.

"That's the spot, right there, where the road twists around that hill. See those big rocks on the left and the drop on the right. That's the spot they chose."

"And that's the only way up?" Parker asked. She was wearing a crisp pin-striped suit.

"Everything has to go through there. There's no way to bypass it. Except by helicopter."

"Helicopters are not feasible," Charlie asserted. "There's too much involved to transport everything by helicopter."

Jagen raised an eyebrow. "So either we prevent them from erecting their log pile, or tear it down and arrest them all. Which is easier?"

"The problem," Dr Charlie replied, "is that after that fiasco at city hall, for which I'm holding certain lower level police employees fully responsible, the yellow press are watching this like vultures. They're hoping for something they can cheapen, exploit, and sensationalize. We need to look good in the media,

and to do that, we have to avoid any more public violence. We have to do this in a way that not only wins, but breaks the subversives' spirit."

"If I may be so bold, sir. Tell me this," Bob said. "if the Agency already has total control of this whole goddamn country, why do we need these towers anyway?"

"There's a lady present," Jagen cut in. "Please watch your language."

"Sorry."

Parker turned to Charlie. "Who does this little fucking prick think he is?"

Charlie didn't know if she meant Bob or Jagen, so just ignored her, and said, "There are a lot of things you don't understand, Bob."

"I'll handle this," Parker interrupted. "It hasn't been made public yet, and it may never be made public, but this country is in a permanent state of emergency. There are millions upon millions of these goddamn radicals, Luddites, subversives, who get up every morning and go to work trying bring down the whole system. At the least sign of encouragement, they scurry out of the walls, like roaches at night. They refuse to understand that, despite its drawbacks, there is no alternative to our system. We are bringing order out of chaos. And anywhere you scratch, chaos is right beneath the surface. Take the Agency, your employer, for example. Who is the Agency? Who runs the Agency, really? There are so many layers on the onion that nobody, nobody knows who's running this thing any more. And maybe nobody's running it. It's on auto pilot and it's gone crazy. I'm talking about the deep state, the government behind the government. That's who we all really work for. The Agency is just one branch. There are many more branches, on all levels of secrecy. You've never heard of many of them. Some of them deny the existence of each other, and many deny the existence of themselves. But they're all there. And the branches don't trust each other, many of them hate each other, they're all

fighting like alley cats over a rotten fish. And for what? Power? There's really nothing there. There's nothing behind the curtain. The whole thing is a pileup of derailed freight trains that keeps on running on ghost tracks. You may not be aware of the pressure I'm under. My career is on the line, and so are all of yours."

"Calm down, Jean," Charlie said. She's off the deep end, he thought.

"With all due respect, madam," Bob put in, "I no longer give a rat's ass for my career."

"Then why the fuck are you doing this?" Parker snapped.

"Maybe I just don't know how to stop and get out."

"Bob, Bob, Bob," Charlie said. "Get real. You can't stop. There is no way out. The Agency owns your life. We're counting on you now."

"Absolutely," Jagen echoed, with some panic in his tone. "We're all counting on you, Bob."

Charlie decided he had to pull this back on track. "Now that Keok's out of the picture, you, Bob, are our eyes and ears on the ground out in their camp. You're the only one who can do what needs to be done. No offense meant, Keok. This happened through no fault of your own. You've done great work, but you're useless to us now in this project, except as an advisor. And we always listen carefully to your advice."

"Call me Jerex," Keok said.

"OK," Bob surrendered. "So what's the plan?"

Jagen, Keok, and Bob all gazed first at Charlie, then at Parker.

Parker grumbled, "It's your shot, Charlie. You're the one packing the big stones on this sortie."

"I realize it makes you uncomfortable, Jean," Charlie replied, "but I didn't set this pecking order, and some of us need to learn to accept their place in it."

“Understood. And some of us need to learn to take personal responsibility for the consequences when their poorly planned schemes go awry.”

Although he really preferred not to, Charlie decided he had to be firm, take tight control. “I’m canceling the VIP tour. We don’t need congressmen and business leaders out there messing things up. Some of them are about as savvy as teenage girls when it comes to this type of operation.”

Parker’s face scrunched. “Once again, you’re overstepping, pulling out the rug, disappointing important, powerful people, and expecting others to clean up your mess. You know perfectly well that was my baby.”

Charlie took that as her admission of defeat. His confidence buoyed, Charlie continued with conviction, although he didn’t really have a plan, winging it as he spoke. “I’m moving up the target date to begin construction by a day. Two days if they can pull it together. The convoy will roll at four a.m. That should catch the bad guys unprepared. Security forces will precede the convoy to clear the road of any problems and secure the area. The pre-dawn hour will also preclude videos in the media of any confrontations, in the unlikely event that any should occur.”

• • •

The next evening, as the air cooled and freshened, the sun approached the western peaks, and the Orphan Mountain Defense Committee gathered at the fire pit for a general meeting. Hundreds of people, a marvelous variety of faces, sizes, ages, genders, races, including a motorcycle club and a group of Buddhist monks in orange robes who had arrived the night before.

On the north and south sides of the circle, under easyup canopies, were two drum groups, each with drummers sitting around a large, skin stretched wooden drum. One of the lead singers began in a high-pitched falsetto, a beautiful, powerful

song, then a strong beat began, the other drummers joined in unison, while the crowd sang along.

After each drum played an opening song, Cayatano stood. “*Yá’át’ééh shik’èí dóó shidine’è*. It is now three days before the first construction convoy is due to arrive, and time for our final preparations. I’ve been asked many times what the name Dzil Na’oodilii means in the Diné language. I tell them it’s usually translated as Revolving Mountain or Encircling Mountain. But a better interpretation is Mountain-That-The-People-Moved-Around. The name refers to events that happened here in this very spot long, long ago. You see, traditional Navajo history tells us that this world we live in is the Fifth World, and that there were other worlds which were created and destroyed before this one. Carmen Tsosie, chair of the local chapter, and a comrade, will explain more.”

Carmen stood, bowed her head for a moment, then began, “Our elders say that Dzil Na’oodilii is the center of the world, and has always been. It was formed by the Holy People, in worlds before this one. Today it is still home to many of the Holy People, and the place of emergence is nearby, where the people emerged from each previous world to a higher one. The Holy People recreated all the sacred mountains, including Dzil Na’oodilii, here from soil they carried from the previous world. Soon after the people emerged, they gathered at its base, and walked around Dzil Na’oodilii, stopping in the four directions, where they planted seeds that the Holy People gave them, and each time they asked the Holy People for help and guidance. And that is exactly what we are going to do tomorrow morning, in preparation for the purpose of our gathering here, to fulfill our mission.” She looked back at Cayatano.

“Yes, we are going to take a ritual walk, a spiritual walk around the mountain tomorrow,” Cayatano took up. “It will not be an easy walk, like a walk in a park. It’s about ten miles as the crow flies, probably around twenty on the ground, and when we reach a certain spot in each of the four directions, we are going to stop and plant seeds and ask the Holy People for guidance

and protection. That will be our preparation for our mission. The traditional Navajo people say that there are blessings to be found between dawn and sunrise, so that is the time we will begin, in the moments before sunrise, and we will begin by making a corn offering. Only two firemen will remain in camp, to keep the fire burning, and two Fire Sticks, to guard the camp, as well as those who for various reasons will not be able to shoulder the strain and endurance the walk will require.”

Someone shouted, “Aho!” other voices echoed, “Aho! Aho!”

“So relax, have a good meal,” Cayatano finished by saying, “and we will see you all out here tomorrow morning to greet the dawn and its blessings.”

Keechee and Claire ladled soup and stew from the huge pots into bowls, some pots a rich mix of vegetables while others with Navajo mutton. Gymma, and Barbara passed them out. Jesse continued to tend the fire, while Meru and Glori repaired a banner that had been torn at the demonstration.

Zelia and Tochtli brought bowls down to the brush house next to the medicine hogan, where Tracy and Jack were staying.

“How are you feeling?” Zelia asked, handing Tracy a bowl.

“Much better than I would have expected,” she replied. “I feel surrounded by such love.”

Tracy had insisted on coming out to the camp, in spite of everything. She was still deeply disturbed, and knew it would be a long time before she would be able to put it behind her. But she decided she needed to be out here with her closest friends. Her doctor would be staying at the camp too, and had told her that nothing more needed to be done, beyond having calm and rest. Tracy decided that she would feel far worse to be back in the city alone, while all her friends and workmates were taking part in these highly spiritual actions out here at the foot of Orphan Mountain.

Tocti and Jack retired to a corner and ate quietly, leaving the women alone.



“This is really a remarkable place,” Zelia said, “like something in a dream.”

“If only the rest of the world were like DZ Camp. And Network Central. In a very different way, the camp reminds me of Network Central.”

“It’s just as extraordinary, in its own way.”

“I wonder how much of this energy is the place itself, and how much is what we’re all bringing to it.”

“I guess we’ll never know.”

“I wish I could come with you on the walk tomorrow,” Tracy said.

“You’ll be with us in spirit.”

“I want to be there in more than that.” She unwound a scarf from around her neck. “Would you carry this with you tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

The next morning hundreds of people gathered before dawn at the fire pit. Cayatano led the sunrise ceremony, giving thanks to Creator and the Holy People, and asking for guidance.

Jesse and Gymma were the firemen chosen to stay behind. As the procession lined up to begin, they sat on some rocks near the fire pit, occasionally stoking the crisscrossed wood with a stick, moving the branches around, creating air pockets so the fire could live, breathe, and move about, and keep the wood slowly burning.

“I feel very honored of course,” Jesse said, “to be doing this. But I’m also disappointed at missing the walk.”

“Me too,” Gymma responded. “It wouldn’t be the same thing, but I’m thinking of just going another time, and doing the walk by myself.”

“That’s a great idea. Can I come with you?”

“How about tomorrow morning?”

With Cayatano, Honawa, Carmen, Glori, and the eagle staff

bearers in the lead, the walkers left camp along barely visible ancient paths toward the mountain, thumping wooden sticks together and shaking rattles, while the Buddhist monks beat their small drums with curved sticks.

When they reached the scree of rock fragments at the mountain's base, dotted with piñon, juniper, sagebrush, and buffalo grass, they turned toward the east. When Cayatano sensed that they were at exactly the correct spot, they stopped, faced east, prayed to Creator and the Holy People again, planted corn kernels, then continued on along the ancient foot paths around Dzil Na'oodilii toward the other three directions.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The day passed quietly and uneventfully for Jesse and Gymma back at Orphan Mountain Camp. They took turns tending the fire, while the other attended to various chores, and occasionally visited people healing in the medicine hogans. Meanwhile, cars were still arriving, and they and the Fire Sticks welcomed incoming blockaders, showed them around camp, and where to pitch their tents.

Late in the afternoon, Jesse and Gymma sat together watching the fire, almost hypnotized by its spirit. Gymma looked up, tapped Jesse's knee, and motioned. "Your friend's back."

A big flatbed truck had driven into the camp, Bob with a load of old tires.

Jesse went to meet him.

"Where is everybody?" Bob asked.

"They went for a walk."

"Camp's really grown. Should I drop these puppies where we left the others?"

"Sure, I'll help you unload."

They began to throw the tires off the flatbed.

"I've still got some bones to pick with you," Jesse said.

"Shoot, brother."

"Just who are these friends of yours?"

"I wish I could say, but I can't."

"Well, I don't ever want any more of their poison help, ever again. Whoever they are, tell them that for me. And another

thing: who said that I threw that crate? You said you'd tell me but you never did."

"That shiteater Keok. The last guy in the world I would have ever thought was a snitch. That bitch was trying to badjacket you. What a fucking world! You can't even trust your own mother."

"Bob, don't be glib to me about this. It's all still hanging over my head."

"It's still hanging over all our heads, brother. Believe me, the pigs may be gone for the moment, but they'll be back. Turn it to your advantage. Lead them on. Play it both ways. Give them some false leads. That'll get them off your case. It beats going to prison."

"Is that what you do?"

Bob looked at him and said nothing.

"It's time to stop jiving me, Bob."

Just then, Jesse heard shouts and turned.

Gymma and the Fire Sticks were welcoming the walkers, who were appearing from the desert to the north, around the other side of Dzil Na'oodilii.

"Where did they walk to?" Bob asked.

"All the way around the mountain."

"Why'd they do that?"

"It was a ceremony."

Bob snickered. "Those fucking Indians! The things they do! And now they got everybody doing it with them!"

"Bob, don't you understand?"

"Understand what?"

"Have you been a player so long that none of this gets through to you? What are you doing here?"

Bob drew back, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, man. You're right. I don't understand nothing. I'm just a player. A fucking

player. That's all I understand. I been a player too long. I can't live like that no more."

He slouched back to his truck, climbed into the cab and sat there, leaving Jesse hanging and wondering.

As dusk settled in, the walkers, tired but elated and gratified, sat around the fire sharing stories of the walk and the day's events.

• • •

It was very late, and the night was very warm. Jesse and Meru pulled their sleeping bags inside one of the shade shelters and zipped them together. They could see the vast expanse of stars through the brush roof.

"One thing that surprised me as we walked around it," Meru said, "is how different DZ looks from different vantage points. From the camp side here she looks like a huge wall, but from back she looks more like a huge bow or arrowhead aimed into the sky, with the peak at the point and two legs of mesa top curved back like a V, or maybe more like an L."

"I've got to get back there and see it."

"You will soon enough. Cayatano didn't show us the exact spot we're going to set up the blockade, but it has to be around in back, that's where the car road goes."

"Now that we're so close to the blockade, I'm getting kind of antsy. Are you?"

"Not really. You're still healing from the police riot."

"I'm still hurting a little, but it's not just that."

"Then what is it, sweetheart?"

He thought a minute, couldn't quite express himself. Then he said, "I swore to myself I would never be violent again, and almost immediately, there I was again. I let myself down."

“Honey, you didn’t let yourself down. You saved yourself and Mom from being victims, and I love you for it. I’ll tell you something that Mom told me a long time ago: when somebody attacks you and you turn his own violence back on him, that’s not violence, that’s self defense. Self defense doesn’t destroy you. Violence destroys you. When you choose violence, whether you win or lose, it turns you into what you’re fighting, and you wind up becoming your own enemy. When violence chooses you, you’ve got to defend yourself.”

“I don’t know if I fully understand, but I kind of understand.”

“As to the blockade, all we’re doing is trying to turn their own violence back on them. I’m still hoping they just somehow get their consciousness raised, change their minds and never show. Until then, I just want to enjoy my time here as long as I can. I love it out here, and I want to enjoy it with you.”

“You know, I love you very much.”

“You sound like you really mean it.”

“I really do,” he said. “I’ll try to just relax and enjoy the moments we have together while we’re here.”

• • •

In the early morning hours of the following night, Dr Charlie, Jagen, Keok, Jean Parker, and Latero relaxed in the back of the long limousine-like van with black glass, one-way windows, sipping drinks while they watched the dark desert skyline pass by. A cool gibbous moon hung low in the western sky

“Any more of that Irish coffee?” Dr Charlie asked.

“I’ll refill your cup,” Jagen replied. His hand was shaking, but he congratulated himself for hiding it well.

“Add a little more bourbon this time. I need it. I’m feeling really raw. I haven’t been up this late—or this early—for years.”

“Pour the whole bottle in,” Parker snapped. “Go ahead. Bottom’s up. It won’t make any difference. He’s already drunk as a flounder.”

“For Christ’s sake, Jean, chill out,” Charlie said. What a sour crew, he thought.

“You’re slurring your speech.”

“Don’t be such a pooper.”

“This is serious business.”

“Of course, but we also might as well try to have a good time while we’re at it. Life is short enough.”

“You all should at least wear your seat belts.”

“We’re almost there,” Keok said. He was used to ignoring scorn, although he never forgot it.

They were following three Navajo police cars, and six more Navajo police cars took up the rear.

At a designated spot, they met a caravan of trucks and semis with transport trailers hauling heavy construction machinery and equipment.

The convoy took its final shape, with the three leading police cars as the vanguard, followed by the limo van, then another police car, the truck caravan, and finally the other five police cars as the rear guard.

Charlie picked up his phone. “The turnoff is directly ahead. Slow down. Lights off.”

All headlights suddenly went black.

Jagen uttered, to no one in particular, “By the time those geese figure out what happened, it’ll be all over.”

At the unmarked junction, they turned slowly off onto the one-lane gravel road.

Charlie spoke into the phone again. “This is designated checkpoint one. Drop off police car one from the rear guard.”

“There’s their camp. Not a person stirring.”

They drove slowly past Orphan Mountain Camp. In the predawn hour the only sign of life was the glowing embers in the fire pit.

“Home free,” Latero muttered.

Charlie spoke into the phone again. “We are passing designated checkpoint two. Drop off police car two from the rear guard.” The last Navajo police car pulled over and shut off their engine.

“It’s just around that curve, beyond those boulders,” Keok said. “That’s where they planned it. After this it’s pretty much a straight shot until we gets higher and steeper, right near the top with that final hairpin turn.”

“This is it,” Charlie said into the phone. “Drop two cars here. Secure the area. This is the primary power nexus.”

Just as they rounded the sharp curve, the Navajo police car in front of them came to an abrupt stop, and they plowed into it.

All except Parker were thrown from their seats.

“Everybody OK?” Charlie asked.

“I told you to wear your seat belts,” Parker growled.

“What’s going on?” Dr Charlie asked over the phone.

“They’re here!” the phone voice replied.

“Who’s here?” Dr Charlie stretched forward out of the back seat, but was not able to see what was going on. He barked to his driver, “Pull up more. Pull up.”

The driver, a Navajo police sergeant, inched forward. They were almost touching the bumper of the car in front of them.

“More.”

The three leading police cars continued to inch forward until the occupants of the long dark van could peek around the curve, though barely. But they could see enough. The road was blocked by piles of logs, rocks and tires, six feet high. A crowd stood around and on top of the barricade.



“Mother fuckers!” Keok muttered.

Jean Parker exclaimed. “I knew you idiots would fuck it up!”

The lead Navajo police car was about five feet from the barricade, red and blue light bars circling and flashing.

“This is impossible,” Latero grumbled.

Three Navajo policemen got out of their cars and approached the barricade.

“Who’s in charge here?”

“We are!” came hundreds of voices.

“Get this debris off the road, or you’ll be arrested.”

Cayatano stepped forward, in front of the barricade, followed by Honawa, Carmen and Glori. Behind them were Keechee, Tochtli, Jesse, Zelia, Claire, Jimmy, Bruce, Meru, Jack, Tracy, Lorenzo, Hector, Barbara, Gymma, a group of Fire Sticks, and numerous others.

“We’re protecting Orphan Mountain,” Cayatano said, “and you should be too.”

“This is illegal! Clear this the road!” the Navajo cop replied.

“This is a blockade,” Honawa said. “Those trucks cannot pass.”

“You are trespassing on public property. You have ten minutes to clear this garbage away.”

“There is no reason to wait ten minutes,” Cayatano said. “We’re not moving.”

Carmen stepped forward. “You officers aren’t from around here. I’m the chair of this chapter. And these are my colleagues.”

“We don’t care who you are. If you want to be arrested, we can do that.”

“All we want is our human rights,” Cayatano said. “Orphan Mountain is a sacred place, you know that. You are Diné like us. It is our religion. And we will protect it.”

The cops walked away, conferred, then one of them went

back and climbed into the van.

The lead cop spoke into the phone. "What now, chief?"

"Everybody back up," Charlie grunted.

Inch by inch, the convoy began backing up, truck by truck.

Glori said, "They can't be just leaving, can they?"

"I don't think so," Cayatano replied.

Keechee looked around. "I wish there were more Navajos here. Everybody's here except the Navajos."

"All the local medicine men are here," Cayatano said. "And that is enough."

"There are three hundred thousand of us Navajos, and we should all be here," Keechee bemoaned.

Carmen responded, "We Diné are a peaceful people, sometimes we're too peaceful. We know how to survive, but we don't always know when we have to fight. Except when we're fighting among ourselves."

Rumbling down the side of the road, with one set of wheels on the desert, came a semi lowboy trailer, carrying a large bulldozer, with great metal tank tracks, a huge blade in front. Two Navajo workmen unhooked the chains that were securing the vehicle. The tail ramps dropped. One of the workmen climbed onto the bulldozer and drove it off the ramp.

The first glow of morning began to spread over the horizon.

"Look," Honawa motioned with his chin.

Keechee squeezed Zelia's shoulder. "They're here!"

From every direction, by foot and on horseback, hundreds of Navajos were crossing the desert and converging on the blockade.

Zelia whispered, primarily to herself, "They've come to protect DZ!"

The surrounding landscape was filling with people.

The operator sat at the controls of the bulldozer, in a

construction helmet and goggles.

The first rays of sunrise bust over the eastern peaks, like points of a crown reaching toward the sky. A great hawk circled overhead.

A small woman in a green velveteen blouse, a long fluted calico skirt, a kerchief tied over her hair, grasped Zelia's arm.

"*Shimá*, what are you doing here?"

"I have heard people say that Dzil Na'oodilii is threatened, and I have come to help."

Keechee said, "It's dangerous here, *shimá*. You need to go home."

"While Dzil Na'oodilii is in danger, I will not leave."

The bulldozer driver revved the engine, then began to inch forward very slowly.

The line of blockaders didn't move.

The huge blade stopped about a foot in front of them. The driver blew his horn.

Still they didn't move.

The driver sat there, began yelling at them, but his words couldn't be heard over the blare of his horn.

He hesitated, then backed up about ten feet, blasted his horn again, threw it into forward, and came at them again.

Again he stopped short, a few inches in front of them.

Zelia could see the pained expression on the man's face.

"Please," he said. "I'm pleading with you. I don't want to hurt nobody. This is just my job."

"Maybe you should get a different job," Carmen replied.

"This is your last warning," he said. "Whatever the consequences, it's not on me, it's on you."

Again he backed up, threw it into forward, and came at them again, a little faster, blasting his horn.

Still they didn't move.

Suddenly he shut off the engine, jumped out of the cab and walked away into the desert, cursing.

A wind swept through them. Zelia looked up and saw distant storm clouds in the eastern sky, beginning to blot out the rising sun. Not far away, to the north and south, the sky remained clear. A small, intense storm was rushing toward them, she could hear the crack and rumble, see sheets of rain and forked lightning.

The group inside the limo van watched the drama through the black glass.

Charlie spoke angrily into the phone. "What do you mean, no one else will do it? We've got ten bulldozer operators with the fleet, but none of them is willing to get out there and do a job? What are we paying them for?"

Latero was fuming. "Those twats! They're's through! They'll never get a job here again! That's why these goddamn Navajos never get anywhere, they've got no balls!"

Dr Charlie's face was contorted with frustration. He turned to Keok, and said, "Can you drive a bulldozer?"

"A little. Back in Asia, it was a long time ago."

"Get out there and do a job!"

Keok cringed and mumbled, "I wish I could. But if those Fire Sticks catch me, they'll kill me."

"Pussy!" Latero spat.

Keok said nothing.

Dr Charlie turned to Jagen, glaring.

"Don't look at me like that, Charlie." Jagen spoke quickly. "I have no idea how those things run."

Parker stiffened her jaw. Her eyes became small and beady, intensely focused on Dr Charlie. "You insisted on being in charge of this, Henderstone, against my recommendation. Don't try your usual gambit of pawning it off on anybody else. Get out there and do it yourself."

Charlie swallowed hard. His adrenalin was rushing, he could barely think straight. He had to shit and he wished now that he hadn't drunk all those Irish coffees. "Latero!" Although the man was only two feet away, Charlie was almost shouting. "These are your crews! These are your contracts for the work! For what we're paying you, you better get somebody out there fast! Get one of your people up in that bulldozer to do the work, or go do it yourself! Either that or you're through!"

Latero was enraged at being spoken to like this, particularly in front of the important lady from the Department of the Interior, but grit his teeth and sputtered, "Don't worry, boss, the work will be done!"

He slid open the side door and stepped out.

As he did, the wind swirled, the first drops of the storm splashed down on the crowd of blockaders.

Cayatano, Honawa, Carmen, and Glori were still in the front line, feet planted, standing before the barricade.

Latero walked toward them.

"Raymond," Carmen said. "What brings you here?"

"I'm through playing with you all. Get out of my way."

When he saw they were not going to move, he turned and walked back to the bulldozer.

He climbed onto the operator's seat, perused the control panel. He pushed a few buttons until he found one that started the engine. He tried to throw it into gear, but didn't know how to work the shift.

The storm hit with fury, swirling winds, sheets of water, a drenching downpour. The blockaders, police, and Latero were soaked almost instantly. The desert sand at first seemed to swallow it whole, then quickly turned to runoff and mud. Zelia could see the deluge drenching the mountain looming above them, and forked lightning appeared to strike the peak.

As Latero got increasingly frustrated, he started cursing at the machine, pushing levers frantically. Finally he yelled,

“Somebody show me how to work this fucking machine!”

Esther stepped out of the crowd and strode slowly up to him.

“Raymond, my son,” Esther said. “Why are you acting this way?”

“Go away, *shimá*.”

Zelia and Keechee hurriedly came beside her, took her arms and tried to lead her back, but she ignored them.

“I have known you since you were a little boy, Raymond. Listen to what the elders say.”

“Mrs Yazzie, I am no longer a little boy.”

“You are acting like you do not belong to a clan, like you have no family.”

“I am the chapter chair. Now get out of my way, Mrs Yazzie, please get out of my way!”

Latero was becoming desperate, working himself into a frenzy. He pushed and pulled the levers and buttons, but nothing happened.

The cascading rain continued to drench them, inundating the mountain, crashing thunder, zigzag lightning.

Latero yelled, “Get out of my way!”

The bulldozer abruptly lurched and jumped forward.

“*Shimá!*” Zelia shouted, threw herself between the bulldozer and her stepmother, just as it was about to hit.

The blade pushed them all back into the barricade, the logs, tires and rocks flying, people hurled in every direction, logs falling down on the bulldozer, but the machine drove on, out of control, thrusting the barricade in every direction, Latero riding it like wild bull.

Chaos ensued.

The bulldozer hurtled through the pile of logs, tires, rocks, and bodies, emerged on the other side and halted.

Suddenly the rain stopped. The storm moved beyond Orphan Mountain, and a double rainbow appeared.

For a moment, everyone was frozen, in shock.

Then the crowd rushed at the bulldozer.

Latero was confused and terrified. He wanted to say he was sorry, he got carried away, he didn't mean it. But he knew it was far too late for that.

He threw it into gear, hit the throttle, and roared up the mountain road at full tilt, amidst a hail of rocks from the blockaders.

Up Orphan Mountain he drove, bouncing in his seat around the curves, which became increasingly sharp and steep, obsessed with his victory or his defeat—he wasn't sure which it was—but now he became determined of only one thing, he had to continue on, to reach the top.

The final hairpin turn rose up before him. The bulldozer bounced as he swung around the last, almost vertical stretch to the top, elated, when suddenly the ground gave way, the roadway collapsed, a torrent of water coursed beneath him, the bulldozer tipped, the entire roadway, the entire earth of Orphan Mountain seemed to slide, and the bulldozer, Latero's fingers still locked around the steering wheel, fell rolling down the side of the mountain into the valley.

• • •

The following events were a blur to Zelia. She became aware that she was in the medical hut in Orphan Mountain Camp, but she didn't know how she got there. Tochtli was holding her hand. Tracy and Jack were nearby. Her head hurt.

“What happened?”

“You'll be alright, darling,” Tochtli said.

“*Shimá* Esther! Did she get hurt, is she OK?”

“She’ll be OK.”

“Cayatano, Keechee, all the others?”

“Some people were hurt. They’ll all be alright. Nobody was killed. Except Lucero.”

“He’s dead?”

“He killed himself. Dzil Na’oodilii killed him.”

“But the blockade, he broke through the blockade, it was all for nothing.”

“No. For the moment we’ve won. The road to the top is gone. They may be back eventually, but for now the mountain has spoken.”

In another part of the camp, Jesse and Bob sat talking in a shade house. Meru was lying quietly on a sleeping bag nearby.

“Thanks, Bob. In the end we couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Let’s just say, MacConnail, that I’ve done one or two worthwhile things in my life. Just trying to make up for all the evil shit I’ve perped over the years. Just make sure that you take care of that snake Jagen, get him as far away as possible from the Network books. I don’t know exactly what dirty games he’s already played with the finances, but you can bet your last peso that he’s planted some poison sleeping pills.”

“Glori and the coordinating committee are taking care of it.”

“I don’t think we’ll see Mr Jagen again soon,” Meru said.

“What are you going to do now?” Jesse asked him. “They must be gunning for you. There’s a target on your back. They must know you’re the only one who could have tipped us about when they were coming.”

“Hell, I’m off tonight to somewhere it’ll be mighty hard to find me.”

“Where’s that?”

Just then Hector and Lorenzo popped their heads into the brush house.



“Ready?” Hector said.

“Yup,” Bob replied. He turned back to Jesse and Meru. “In a couple of days I’ll be somewhere deep in Mexico.”

They shook hands and hugged.

“Until we meet again.”

“Someday, maybe.”

When they were gone, Jesse climbed into the sleeping bag with Meru. The last light of the day suffused through the sticks and brush that formed the walls.

He slipped his hand inside her thighs.

“Not now, sweetheart,” she said.

“I just want to hold you for a few minutes.”

The lovers clasped each other, and through the chinks and gaps of the brush house, they watched the stars.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Curl is author of thirteen volumes of poetry, three of history, a memoir, translations of classical Native American poetry, a drama, and numerous other works.

Born in New York City, John Curl's family was a mixture of Irish Catholic, English Protestant, and Romanian and Austrian Jew. One grandfather was a Republican, the other a Communist, and his parents New Deal Democrats. During the winters he grew up in Manhattan, and during the summers in New Jersey farm country without electricity or running water. His father was a post office worker, and his mother had been a show girl before she became mom, working for a while with Abbot and Costello. He has a degree in Comparative Literature from New York City College. He currently resides in Berkeley, California with his wife, and has one daughter. He is a professional woodworker by trade, and a founding member of Heartwood Cooperative Woodshop (1974). He is a board member of the Network of Bay Area Cooperatives (NoBAWC). He served as chair of West Berkeley Artisans and Industrial Companies (WEBAIC) and as a Berkeley planning commissioner. He was a founding member of Indigenous Peoples Day in 1991, and has worked on the Berkeley powwow for over 20 years. He is vice-president of PEN Oakland, "The blue collar PEN," and a member of the Revolutionary Poets Brigade. His play *The Trial of Christopher Columbus* was produced by the Writers Theater in 2009. His transliterations from Quechua formed the libretto for Tania León's *Ancient* (2009). He represented the USA at the World Poetry Festival in 2010 in Caracas, Venezuela.



## OTHER WORKS BY JOHN CURL

### *Memoir:*

Memories of Drop City: The first hippie commune of the 1960s and the summer of love (2008).

### *History:*

For All The People: Uncovering the hidden history of cooperation, cooperative movements, and communalism in America (2009, 2012); History of Collectivity in the San Francisco Bay Area (1982); History of Work Cooperation in America (1980).

### *Translation:*

Ancient American Poets: The Flower Songs of Nezahualcoyotl, The Songs of Dzitbalche, The Sacred Hymns of Pachacuti (2005).

### *Poetry:*

Yoga Sutras of Fidel Castro (2013); Revolutionary Alchemy: Collected poems 1967-2012 (2012); Scorched Birth (2004); Columbus in the Bay of Pigs (1991); Decade (1987); Tidal News (1982); Cosmic Athletics (1980); Ride the Wind (1979); Spring Ritual (1978); Insurrection/Resurrection (1975); Commu 1 (1971); Change/Tears (1967).

### *Drama:*

The Trial of Christopher Columbus (2009).

