

Chapter 1

It was dark when he stepped outside into the cool air. Overhead the last crystals of night faded into a soft blue blanket that would precede the dawn. Through the thick pads of his calloused feet he could feel the rocky, cracked, cold earth. He would wear his huaraches after he left and was away from the sleeping village.

He had not slept for much of the night. Had not been sleeping for longer than he could remember. Had not slept as he did when he was young. The bones within ached, but he was old and that was to be expected.

He began to work long bony fingers into the area above his chest. The area that had made him feel old since he first felt the soreness that was there. The area where his satchel would push down as he walked.

He thought about tea, but the smoke from the mesquite would betray him as would the clatter of his old blue percolator and he decided against it.

He stepped back inside the shed, looked around once, taking in the cot, patched and sagging, the desk and the stove. He went to the desk and considered its drawers. There was nothing there that should go in his satchel. He would need only his tools. His crowbar, his worn rawhide gloves, his rope, the can of pitch, the tin of grease and his pliers. Not the book.

But if I die. If I go too far or fall into a hole. If my leg is broken then I might want the book.

He dismissed those thoughts.

If you die then you can't read. If you are dying then you should try to live. And if it is too much, that is what the gun is for. Besides, you've read the book already. Many times in fact.

He put the book back in its place.

He went to the shelf and opened the cigar box that contained the pistol. He loved the box more than the gun inside. The picture of the sea, the city, and the waving palms on the front reminded him of places in the book. Inside the box, the gun, dull and waiting along with five loose shells, an evil number, rattled as his stiff fingers chased them across the bottom.

Moving quickly now he took the old blue percolator and rolled it into the thin blanket that lay on the cot. He stuffed them both inside the worn satchel, reminding him of the book's description of the furled sail. "Patched with flour sacks . . . it looked the flag of permanent defeat." He shouldered the bag quickly and chased the line away telling himself he was thinking too much of the book and not the things he should be. He looked around the shed once more.

Come back with something. And if not, then goodbye.

He passed silently along the trail that led through the village. To the west, the field of broken glass began to glitter like fallen stars in the hard-packed red dirt as it always did in this time before the sun.

At the pantry he took cooked beans, tortillas, and a little bit of rice from the night before. The village would not miss these things. Still they would be angry with him. Angry he had gone. Even though they wished he would because he was unlucky.

Salao. In the book unlucky is *Salao*. The worst kind.

The villagers say you are "curst."

He filled his water bottle from the spring, drank a bit and filled it again. The water was cold and tasted of iron. He drank again and filled it once more. Soon the day would be very hot.

At the top of the small rise east of the village he looked back.

Forty years maybe. If my count has been right.

It was an old processing plant by the side of the highway east of what was once Yuma. It was rusting in the desert before the bombs fell, now it was the market and pantry of the village. Its outlying sheds the houses of the villagers, his friends and family. He tried to see if smoke was rising yet from his son's house. But his daughter-in-law would be tired from the new baby.

So maybe she is still sleeping.

If his granddaughter came running out, seeing him at the top of the rise against the dawn, he would have to send her back. He was going too deep into the wasteland today.

Too dangerous for her.

Even though she knows every trick of salvage?

I might need her. What if I find something big?

“I may not be as strong as I think, but I know many tricks and I have resolution.”

My friend in the book would say that, yes.

He would send her back. It was too dangerous. He adjusted the strap wider on his shoulder to protect the area above his heart where the satchel always bit, then turned and walked down the slope away from the village and into the wasteland.

Chapter 2

He sang bits of a song he knew from Before. Years hid most of the lyrics and now he wanted to remember when he first heard the song. As if the memory would bring back the lost words he'd skipped over.

Time keeps its secrets. Not like this desert. Not like the wasteland.

In the rising sun, his muscles began to loosen as his stride began to lengthen, and soon the ache was gone from his bones. His course was set between two peaks none of the village had ever bothered to name after the cataclysm. Maybe once someone had a name for them. Probably on charts and rail survey maps of the area once known as the Sonoran Desert. But such things had since crumbled or burned up.

And what are names? He once had a name. Now the villagers simply called him the Old Man. It seemed appropriate. Often he responded.

At noon he stopped for the cool water in the bottle kept beneath the blanket in his satchel. Still mumbling the words of the song among the silent broken rocks, he drank slowly. He had reached the saddle between the two low hills.

Where had he first heard the song? he wondered.

Below, the bowl of the wasteland lay open and shimmering. On the far horizon, jagged peaks; beyond those, the bones of cities.

For seventy-eight days the Old Man had gone west with the other salvagers, heading out at dawn with hot tea con leche and sweet fry bread. Walking and pulling their sleds and pallets. In teams and sometimes alone. For seventy-eight days the Old Man had gone out and brought back nothing.

My friend in the book went eighty-six days. Then he caught the big fish. So I have a few days to go. I am only seventy-eight days unlucky. Not eighty-six. That would be worse.

Every canyon silent, every shed searched, every wreck empty. It was just bad luck the others said. It would turn. But in the days that followed he found himself alone for most of the day. If he went down a road, keeping sight of the other teams, they would soon be lost from view. At noon he would eat alone in the shade of a large rock and smell on a sudden breeze their cookfires. He missed those times, after the shared lunch, the talk and short nap before they would start anew at what one had found, pulling it from the earth, extracting it from a wreck, hauling it back to the village. Returning after nightfall as the women and children came out to see this great new thing they could have back. This thing that had been rescued from the time Before and would be theirs in the time of Now. Forty years of that, morning, noon, and night of salvage. It was good work. It was the only work.

Until he found the hot radio.

His first years of salvage were of the things that had built the village. On early nights when the salvagers returned and light still hung in the sky, he could walk through the village and see the things he had hauled from the desert. The door on his son's house that had once been part of a refrigerator from a trailer he and Big Pedro had found south of the Great Wreck. The trailer someone had been living in after the bombs. There were opened cans, beer, and food inside the trailer. Cigarette butts in piles. That had been fifteen years after the war. But when they opened the door it was silent and still. An afternoon wind had picked up and the trailer rocked in the brief gusts that seem to come and go as

if by their own choosing. Big Pedro did not like such places. The Old Man never asked the why of how someone salvaged. He accepted this of Pedro and together they'd worked for a time.

Outside he heard Pedro asking if there was anything. The Old Man knew he would find a dead body. There were always dead bodies. Salvage and dead bodies go hand in hand.

The trailer rocked for a moment, and as the Old Man adjusted his eyes to the dim light within, he waited for salvage to be revealed. This was how one salvaged. Just waiting and watching a thing. A wreck, someone's home, or a railway shed. In the desert it paid to wait. A quick choice owned you. A wrench, a hammer, and one might not see the saw. Too often the wealth of the past could distract one from what was really there. He had seen piles of money, gold, jewelry, pornography. What good were such things now?

But in the trailer there was a story. There was always a story of salvage. In a wreck, one could see the skeletons crushed under the weight of their possessions as the vehicle left the highway. Rolling over and over in the dirt and down a culvert. To lie trapped for years. Waiting for ambulances that would not come. Rescue that could not rescue itself while mushroom clouds broke the unbroken horizon. On that day when everything changed.

On that long ago hot afternoon when Big Pedro waited outside in the sighing wind, all was quiet inside. He stepped in, closing the door behind him. There was no life here. Just dry dust and the shed skins of the rattlers that seemed everywhere at times and then at others could not be found.

All the cans were crushed, all the cigarettes that lay in neat piles had been smoked down to the filter. Whoever had lived here had brought these cans and cigarettes from the cities. Beer and cigarettes, possibly a gun. Cans of food. But it had been too little. Whatever one brought for the destruction was always too little. The Old Man had seen it, would see it a thousand different ways. In the wrecks and the sheds and the boxcars and the fortified gas stations how long can any supplies last? Could anyone during those two weeks, when a new bomb fell on a new city each new day, could anyone have known that the terror would never end? That life as one knew it would never return.

No, even I did not know it.

Next week the government will come, things will return to normal. Next year. In two years' time. One day you stop waiting and you begin to salvage.

What your crowbar can bring up from the desert is the only thing you can expect.

Whoever once lived in that trailer had refused to believe things would never be the same. It was a tale of smoked cigarettes near a smashed radio in the corner. Alcohol through the long night as angry winds struck at the sides of the trailer like some giant moving in the outer dark. Tomorrow became next year and next year became too much to bear. Eventually, whoever it was left, and that was all the story that remained and could be told truthfully of the trailer. What happened after, a gunshot at the end of a broken leg, sunstroke, exposure, insanity; those also were stories the Old Man had seen in the desert. But who could connect one to the other? One learned after the bombs to stop needing answers or the ends of stories.

There was little salvage in the trailer. What remained was obvious. The refrigerator. Who could take that where they were going? Unless there was power of a sort where the journey, or the flight as it felt, ended. But in the Old Man's village there was power, sometimes.

Soon he and Big Pedro, sweating, had the refrigerator out on the cracked and broken highway, east of the Great Wreck. It took the better part of three days to get it back to the village. Word spread among the villagers that something big had been found. The Old Man and Pedro were bringing

something back. On the last day, two hours after dawn the villagers began to arrive in pairs and groups along the broken highway, their curiosity unrestrained, uncontrollable. The haul back became a carnival. By nightfall, remembered the Old Man, a pig had been killed; precious few of them then. All through the night Jason the Fixer worked, cursing coils and elements. At midnight the thing began to hum and two hours later there was ice.

In the hours leading up to dawn, in the main hall of the old factory, the Old Man was the first to stand in front of the open door and feel the cold. How many years had it been since he stood in front of an open refrigerator door in the middle of the night, feeling that precious cold caress the dust-caked lines of his face? He didn't remember, he didn't care. The cold was enough.

"We would have that for all of our lives."

That's what my friend in the book said when he and the boy talked of taking the great baseball player fishing. He understood.

"We would have that for all of our lives."

Now the Old Man took another drink from his water bottle. That night of the refrigerator, the days ending in a carnivale of roast pig meat and ice seemed long ago. Something that happened to a hero who was not him, did not look like the old face in the pieces of mirror on the few days he chose to shave each week.

He looked at the bowl of the wasteland. It seemed empty and void. A place of nothing.

I must go into it. I am cursed by that hot radio.

They never said you could not salvage with them again.

They didn't need to.

From the Great Wreck to the village and as far east as the Gas Station he would no longer salvage, though no one salvaged in the East anyway as it was considered evil. Even the Gas Station, which lay on the far side of a small town that burned to the ground for no reason anyone could remember in the days of the bombs, held little salvage. Further east the bombs had fallen. Anything from there was as bad as the hot radio. The village would allow no salvage from there.

So he could not go east, and west and south was for the village. He must go north. North lay the wasteland.

He rolled his water bottle back into his thin blanket, placing it back in the patched leather satchel. He placed the wide-brimmed hat he always wore back atop the stubble of his scalp. There was nothing in the wasteland. No salvage ever came of it. Treks into it returned with nothing or never returned.

The sun was high above now. Adjusting the strap, he set off down the rocky slope, dodging lone black volcanic rocks that had dotted the landscape long before the bombs, before the Spanish, before the Anasazi.

Chapter 3

In the desert, alone, I must look far and near at once. Things that are far seem very near and I must remember that.

Jagged pink peaks to the east seemed a day's walk. But the Old Man knew they were well beyond that.

Maybe there is another reason for my curse and not the hot radio. Maybe I have become lazy. Too used to finding easy salvage on the ground at my feet. Or others finding it for me.

Heading down the slope into the white sandy bowl of the wasteland, the thought of his failure as a salvager gave the Old Man a new comfort. Maybe it was not a curse. He needed better technique; he had grown lazy. He would return to everything he knew about salvage; he would forget to be lazy and instead remind himself to be vigilant. To leave no stone unturned. This was better than being cursed.

On a far ridgeline, he saw movement and wondered if it were goats moving among the clipped rocks. For a long time he kept checking the ridge, hoping to see them again, but in time he gave up and cursed himself for not sticking to his new promise. Later, after the sun's heat had reached its apex then sank to the horizon behind him, the details of the landscape ahead came into focus.

The heavy sunlight and the sandstorms that seemed to come and go throughout the day had revealed nothing more than a hazy diffusion across his vision. Now as the last light of day shone directly into the heart of the wasteland, he could make out details. Purple scrub and gentle orange hills rising up along the edge he would make by tomorrow. Off to the east he saw a vehicle.

He'd heard of this vehicle. The few who had tried the wasteland had never gone more than a day or two into its depths. All told of the vehicle. It lay to the east and it was always bad to head east. The villagers would often mutter, *What good could come from the east?*

Stopping for a sip of water, he considered the vehicle, a splotch of red rust in the afternoon haze.

It seems harmless and there may be something to salvage. But it is east.

This is why you are here. Do you believe in the curse or in your own laziness? If it is the curse, then anything east can only make the curse worse. But if it is because you have lost the gift you once had for salvage because you look for what is obvious and easy, then there is no curse and the vehicle is the first rule of salvage. Some always leads to more.

The Old Man replaced the water bottle and shouldered his satchel. Thinking of when he might rest, he turned toward the east and the rusty car.

Night fell, but the sky remained blue for a long time. He lost sight of the car as he descended in and out of dry streambeds. For the last hour he hunted for it in the dark and just when he had begun to curse himself that he was indeed useless and had lost it altogether, he found it.

It was a sedan, half sunk in the dirt that became mud every monsoon season and frozen clay in the winter that followed. Forty cycles of monsoon, chill, and withering summer.

The Old Man dropped his satchel and gathered brush and mesquite. It was early fall and the nights would be cold. It was important to get a fire going.

Once the fire was in bloom with sparks rising into the night, the Old Man retrieved his crowbar and the tin of grease. He searched the wreck, finding a pile of bones on the floor beneath the steering column. The seats had turned to springs and nothing remained of the foam or material that had once

covered them. The backseat held nothing, and in the trunk someone had once lit a fire, probably camping under the roof of the car. The fire in the trunk had kept them warm.

The Old Man returned to the fire and removed the cold beans from his satchel. Unrolling his blanket, he found the tortillas but decided to save them for morning. He placed the tin of beans in the fire and waited.

Above, dashing comets and stars restlessly winked at one another. Was there some sort of communication among them? How far away were they? Once the Old Man had seen, on a night far from the village, a satellite moving up there. Long after the bombs. It crossed the sky steadily, almost slowly, still flashing its lights. Its power still on. The Old Man looked for it again tonight.

The beans tasted good.

That was how hungry I was. A hard day's work and food tastes good.

Putting the beans down the Old Man returned to the car once more.

Why here?

He looked at the front of the car.

The driver either crashed into something or ran out of fuel. But for some reason the driver stopped here. Were you dying?

In the days of the bombs, the Old Man who had been a young man remembered the chaos and disorder. Remembered the authorities shooting people. Fleeing Los Angeles, he had been stopped at a checkpoint just south of San Clemente. For hours he had been stopped as military helicopters crossed the sky above the reactor close to the ocean. It had made him nervous being that close to a primary target, the big reactors. A man arguing with the guards in a car ahead of him began to scream. Then the man left his car and began running for the mountains on the far side of the road. The guards shot him. His family, his wife screaming, a wide-eyed child in the back of the car watching.

I have not thought of that for years.

Why would you?

The fire popped noisily for a moment and then the deep silence of the wasteland at night settled back upon him.

But you stopped the car here. Why?

The windshield still held most of its dirty glass. It had spider-webbed into a blanket of crystals. But on the passenger side the windshield held a hole.

Something was on the passenger seat and when you hit the rock that stopped you, whatever it was came out and left the hole.

It was impossible to see what was underneath the car, but the Old Man suspected a big rock, low and jagged, had snagged the axle and stopped the vehicle dead.

The Old Man returned to his satchel and retrieved the can of pitch. Taking a stick, he covered the end with pitch and lit it in the fire. He returned to the front of the car that lay at the top of a small hill. He turned away from the car and faced outward into the dark.

There is always a story. To find it I need to know what happened. You are wounded. You are fleeing the cities and have become wounded. You have no plan, few supplies, and as the day progresses, as you flee burning Phoenix or forbidden Tucson, you drive off the road. The roads are a mess, refugees and Army fleeing to Yuma, which will be nuked in a day or two because of its base and refugee camps. You drive off the road. You are not thinking clearly; driving too fast you are wounded and sick or hungry and you have begun to believe you will find something out here.

Something that will save you. But the vehicle is running out of gas, so you keep driving to the top of ridges and small hills, racing up the sandy shale to avoid getting stuck, then looking to see if there is any refuge in sight. On this hill you race up fast. The ground on the far side was soft. Yes I felt that as I walked up. Suddenly as you gun the accelerator, you slam into the rock and out goes the one thing you managed to grab before the destruction. The car is hopelessly stuck and soon you die. Maybe you kill yourself with a pistol. But one of the countless salvagers who has wandered here has found that since, along with whatever supplies were in the trunk or backseat. Ah, a pistol and blankets and food, thinks my fellow salvager, what luck I have found good things. And he ignores the hole in the windshield. He has ignored the second rule of salvage. Be still and understand the story of what happened in this place. Quick action blinds.

How fast were you going when you hit the rock? Fast enough that it came upon you and took you by surprise? But not so fast, since you were nearing the top. Maybe you blacked out?

The Old Man walked outward from the front of the car. He thought of the size of the hole and the weight of the object as he walked down the other side of the hill scanning the ground.

Someone may have found it?

That does not matter. You are thinking as you once thought. Telling the story first. If you find the resting place of the thing and it is gone then you have won because you thought the way you are supposed to think. Some will always lead to more. That is the first rule.

I could wait until morning?

Why? You will sleep badly and all night think about where to look in the morning.

At the bottom of the hill was a dry riverbed. Holding his torch down near the ground he checked the bed for ash.

In the years after the destruction, flash floods of ash had filled the old stream beds as the snowpack of that long winter had finally come to an end.

If the thing had fallen into the streambed then it is lost. Carried off by rivers of ash in the years since. Also most travelers use streambeds to move. They are shady, there might be water, and the rains may have collected salvage.

So if it landed in the stream then it is as good as gone.

Looking back to align himself with the car, he climbed up the rocky slope to the far side of the dry streambed. A few feet away he found a battered aluminum ice chest, half sunk in the mud and hidden by a mesquite tree that had grown up around its base. It was empty. Someone else had found it. Had followed the clues and found the thing in the dried mud with the broken cover.

The chest was too light to have made the journey from passenger seat through the window down the hill and across the streambed to land where it did. Whatever had once been inside had been heavy enough to propel it that far.

In front of the fire, the Old Man sat cross-legged and treated himself to one of the tortillas. He congratulated himself on finding the ice chest and thought little that it contained nothing. Instead he was happy that he had found it. Maybe the curse was a lie. It was he who had been lazy, easily accepting the blame of the curse. He was to blame. If so, then things were changing.

He finished the tortilla, put more mesquite on the fire, and took only a small drink of water so he did not have to pee in the night. He rolled himself in his thin blanket and was soon deep asleep. In the night when the fire was low, he awoke thinking, 'I am sleeping really well tonight,' as though he had accomplished a great thing that had eluded him for some time. Pleased, he fell asleep once more.

Chapter 4

The next day he crossed into the dunes of the wasteland. The scrub and hard rock gave way to smooth sand pink with the rising sun. By noon the landscape faded and the pink of morning turned a blinding white.

It was still early fall. It wasn't as hot as it had been earlier in the year. The Old Man sipped the bottle of water, only half full now, and felt the heat more than he had expected to.

I need to look for water. Soon I will go too far and if I don't find anything, then even making it back to the village might be impossible.

Maybe they are looking for me.

In the night, toward dawn, he had dreamed of the child in the backseat of the car of the screaming man the guards had shot. She was the same age of forty years ago but the Old Man was still old, even though he had been younger that long-ago day than her father.

In the dream he was back in the village. The child, who was a girl most surely, had knocked on his door. After letting her in the Old Man gave her cold water and she sat down at his desk, looking out the one window he had salvaged from an overturned semi.

Have you been walking all night to get here? he remembered asking her. As if a night's journey accounted for all the years in between that day and the dream.

But the child remained staring out the window, lost in thought and when she turned back to the Old Man she looked at him smiling. Then she said, *It never happened, y'know.* In the way a child who is young can affect a certain seriousness.

But the Old Man wasn't sure if she meant her father being shot by the side of the freeway under the shadow of the reactors. Or something else.

He woke with a start, and already a desert breeze was blowing across the soft blue of first morning. He rose quickly, promised himself some breakfast later and was soon away from the wreck. The dream had bothered him. And he wondered if the dream of the child and the wreck of the car weren't the cause of it.

Later, he felt better as he walked through a line of dunes. He was away from what was known to him of wrecks and the worst kind of luck. The wasteland was new. It was unknown. In a few hours, by nightfall, he would be farther than anyone had tell of in the depths of the wasteland. If anything, that was something.

So why did the dream bother you? It's noon, so speak it now and be done with it so the child does not return tonight.

Ahead, the wasteland fell deeper into a series of white dunes, and the Old Man entered them, weaving about the floor of them rather than climbing to the top of each.

I'll do my best to keep a rough bearing north and maybe a little east. I'll need water soon.

East is cursed.

Then my curse and the curse of the east will cancel each other out.

He couldn't remember what that was called; it was a law or something, something he had once learned in school.

How strange, he thought in the silence between the dunes. School. To think, once I attended a

school. An elementary school, a school after that, and then even a high school. College. I couldn't even begin to explain school to the young of the village.

I am thinking too much. That is why I had the dream of the child. Too many things are coming up from the past and it is making my mind race. The silence of the wasteland is good for thinking.

You must think about water and salvage. You can't just think about the past. If you don't find water you won't be able to find something out here and bring it back to the village.

The shadows began to lengthen and soon the shade of the dunes became cool. Gathering stray brush he set up his camp in the lee of a long dune and soon had a fire going.

There had not been the least sign of any salvage, anything man had made, or even the presence of man. The Old Man sat chewing a tortilla and thinking about this. Usually back near the village, even though it was the desert, there seemed to be nothing but the things of man's past. All the collected salvage. The wrecks, the dead towns and settlements. Bones.

But how long since anyone had been through the wasteland? It had been forty years since the bombs. The years since, reasoned the Old Man, had been too hard. Too close to the bone for anything that didn't yield enough profit to allow survival to the next day.

Maybe that was why there was no salvage in the wasteland.

Staring into the fire, he thought of the child.

Did she survive that day?

Not if she remained on the West Coast, especially from Los Angeles to San Diego.

But if she had survived would her life have been good?

She would have less memories of what was lost. That is a kind of "good."

Those who survived those weeks of bombing, each one struggled with a question that determined whether they would keep salvaging or give up and die.

What was the question?

Can you let go of what is gone?

I think at first I felt that I could not go on. The things I lost were too painful and I could not imagine a life without them. I remember feeling awful. All the time. But I cannot remember when I changed. When I thought of salvage. When I thought of what was today and not of what had been or what was lost.

For a long time he sat hugging his knees, watching the crystal of the sky turn and revolve, and when the fire had burned down to red ash, he moved his blanket close to it and sat for a little while more, listening to it pop. Soon the sky began to grow dark. 'In a few nights,' he thought, his last thought before sleeping, 'we'll have the moon.' Funny saying "we" he wondered, sleeping.