

ONE

“YOU EVER HELD A GUN BEFORE?”

Matthew glanced down at the slick, silver gun in Chris’s stocky brown hand. A sharp, electric feeling coursed through him, and he held his hand out for the gun.

“You wanna hold it?”

“Sure,” he said, moving his hand farther out. Chris placed it in Matthew’s palm, and he closed his fingers around it, hard.

“Don’t worry bro, the safety’s on.”

“Ha. That’s what she said.”

“Aw, shit, lame,” Chris said. “Lame bro.”

“OK,” Matthew said, holding it facedown in his long, thin hand.

“You like the feel of that? It’s a .22. It’s perfect because you can put it here,” and with this Chris plucked it expertly out of Matthew’s hand and, making sure the safety was on again, tucked it neatly into the back of his oversized khakis, behind his tightly buckled belt. He turned all the way around, his small black eyes beaming with pride, and then pulled it out and handed it back to Matthew. Matthew smiled back. Matthew loved him. He loved him so much.

Chris had cleaned him up. As long as Matthew could remember, he drank, and he wanted to drink, and to drown himself. The urge for it was stronger than the urge for anything. In Farmington, in the apartment he’d grown up in, his mother had started bringing men around, and she would drink, and the men would drink, and some of them would hit Matthew, and some of them would touch him at

night while his mother was passed out. “Ishkeh,” Chris would always say, “don’t take shit from *anyone*, white or Indian. Including me,” and Matthew would nod, thinking that he would take any shit from Chris, that he’d do anything for him.

“I like the feel of it a lot,” Matthew said, though to be honest, he was feeling more fear than excitement. It was like the gun was a big, angry silver snake that had somehow found its way into Matthew’s hand. A snake that was going to bite him long before it bit anyone else.

“We’re gonna have to work on getting you your own gun, and that’ll take some time.”

“You’re gonna get me my own gun?” Matthew asked. They were about twenty miles outside of Albuquerque, at the base of the mountains, in a spot the guys used for gun practice. Or just to fuck around, get drunk, and shoot shit for fun. Or sometimes where they took people. A bunch of cans were lined up on old stumps, abandoned car parts, old furniture. Chris laughed.

Matthew could feel the dry, desert wind on his face, the heat winding off the beige and green landscape in waves.

“Of course,” he said, patting Matthew on the back. Matthew looked down at the gun suspiciously, like it had a mind of its own, one that Matthew couldn’t control. But Matthew was used to feeling like that, like so much was out of his control. Most of the time, he found ways to crawl inside himself, to not be.

“It’s not gonna be perfect, but you wanna practice, Ishkeh?”

“Sure,” Matthew said.

“Will anyone hear?”

“Not this far out, man.”

“OK,” Matthew said uneasily, lifting the gun close to his eye.

“Whoa! Wait a minute!” Chris said, clapping his hands on either side of the gun and pointing it quickly, but carefully down at the dusty ground rich with sagebrush. Don’t hold it that close to your eye—when it kicks back, and it will, you’re gonna do some serious damage to your eye, bro. We need your eye.”

“Sorry,” Matthew mumbled, embarrassed.

“Don’t be sorry. Though damn, kinda funny to think of an Apache who ain’t never learned to shoot a gun,” Chris said. “You guys were the OG Indian gunslingers, like giving those fucking government cowboys the slip all over the place.”

“We’re pretty wily,” Matthew said, arching an eyebrow.

“Wily my ass, you skinny shit. Just—” and Chris helped Matthew position it in his hands.

“OK,” Matthew said, afraid that the way his hands were sweating, he was going to drop the gun and shoot either himself or Chris in the balls. There was something cartoonishly funny about that, and Matthew giggled.

“What you laughing like a six-year-old girl for? Someone be tickling you? Yo, just relax. Don’t shoot yet, Ishkeh. Think about—you ever play basketball?”

“Yes,” Matthew said. That had been the one sport he hadn’t completely sucked at, the one sport that when the ball came toward him, he didn’t close his eyes and let it bounce off his head. He had liked the *ping* noise it always made when he dribbled, the rubbery smell the ball had when he lifted it up to his nose. He had gotten pretty good when he was still going to school, before he had completely given up on that, gone to the streets to drink full-time.

“OK, well bro, like think of this the same way,” Chris said, running his hand over his shaved head. “Like this shit’s fun. And you gotta get in the zone, you know, you can’t overthink it.”

“Oh, *fuuuuun*,” Matthew squealed in a teenage girl’s voice.

“Shut the fuck up, Ishkeh, and shoot.”

Matthew sighed and tried to relax. He looked at the faded can of Pepsi a few feet away and squeezed the trigger. It kicked back, and he yelled happily, and he could hear Chris laughing and shouting.

“Not bad for your first shot! You hit the TV, man.”

Matthew looked at the old television that the coke can was sitting on and saw that there was a new hole.

“You a regular fucking *gangsta*,” Chris said, and they both laughed. Chris patted Matthew’s shoulder affectionately, and Matthew felt good.

“Don’t get cocky on me now,” Chris said, and Matthew laughed. “Man, I been raised in this shit, like, Pee-Wee to OG,” Chris said, running his short, callused hands over his shaved head. “But I think we can get you up to par. You gotta be ready to heart-check though yo.”

“Heart check?” Matthew asked, frowning.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s no biggie, just shit the guys are gonna want to see you do, like you know, in front of God, just to make sure you’re in it to win it. You know, to make sure you’re down.”

“I’m down,” Matthew said seriously, and Chris laughed, hard.

“Bro, I know you down. You down as hell, but you know how it is, it’s tough this shit, this slanging drugs and shit, and dudes gotta make sure other dudes have each other’s backs or shit gets fucked fast.”

Matthew was silent for a while and then nodded. “Can I try again?” he asked.

“Hell, yeah. That’s what I brought you here for.”

“Cool,” Matthew said, and held the gun back up.

“OK, remember, don’t hold it too close to your eye, and remember everything else I told you on the way up.”

“OK,” Matthew said, and took another breath. He shot, and this time he missed even the television. It spun somewhere deep into the cracked, brown desert.

“That’s OK, that’s OK, just keep practicing.”

“OK,” Matthew said, and held the gun up again. They were there for a few hours, Chris getting some shots in as well, and by the end of the day, Matthew had hit the can twice.

“OK, rock star, let’s go the fuck out on the town to celebrate. I wanna give some bitches some dolla dolla bills y’all.”

“Like just hand them some dolla dolla bills or what?” Matthew asked playfully, following Chris back to the SUV.

“Nah, son. You know I make them work for it.”

“Like as in hire them to move furniture?”

“Very funny playa,” Chris said, and Matthew got into the driver’s side and sunk back into the seat.

“What about . . . about Maria?” Matthew asked tentatively.

Chris frowned. “Yo, *fuck* that bitch. I don’t wanna hear another word about that cunt today.”

“OK,” Matthew said, feeling bad. He scratched awkwardly at the side of his wide, brown face.

“Wanna Bud?” Chris asked. They had brought a cooler, one of those cheap foam coolers that you could buy at Smith’s for a couple of dollars.

“Sure,” Matthew said. He reached back and got one for both of them, his arm thrusting deep into the ice. Matthew cracked the beer open, the sound of it beautiful, the taste of the foamy, tart beer trailing down his throat something he tried not to enjoy too much. That was the thing. As soon as he got the taste of one beer in his mouth, he wanted another. And another. But he was getting better about that.

When Matthew allowed himself to think about why he drank, which wasn’t very often, he thought about running up to his mother when he was very little, hoping she’d hold him, let him sit on his lap. She smelled of lavender soap and beer. But there was always a man there, and if he didn’t slap him away like he was some sort of stray cat, his mother would. He would go to the white-walled bedroom he shared with his sister and curl into the dirty sheets and cry, the sound of his mother’s laughter echoing throughout the tiny apartment. That was the thing with Maria. She was tough, like his mom. But she also knew how to be sweet. Sweet in a way that got to him.

Chris turned the Tupac up. “California” echoed throughout the gray pleather interior of the SUV.

“Yo this song is *the shit* son,” Chris said, turning the radio up and rolling the window down.

“It is so much shit,” Matthew said, and Chris hit him in the arm, both of them giggling like little girls, rolling his window down too. Matthew’s thing had always been classic rock and heavy metal. Especially death metal. But Chris loved hip-hop, especially Tupac.

Chris took a swig of his Bud and wiped at his mouth, looking over at Matthew and smiling.

“You know what? When we hit it big time, this is gonna be a big black Escalade. And we’ll be drinking nothing but Cristal, son. *Shiiiiit.*”

“What’s that?” Matthew said, and Chris laughed.

“You ain’t never seen that shit in a rap video?” Chris asked incredulously, while Matthew threw his arms around himself in exaggerated gang posture, his lips poking out.

“*Yeeahhhh giivrrll,*” he said, and Chris told him to shut the fuck up.

Chris swallowed nearly his entire beer in a couple of long gulps and then tossed the empty can into the back. “It’s champagne. The best fucking champagne in the world, *mothafucka*, that’s why gangsters and rappers and rich white fuckers drink it. And soon we’ll be doing nothing but celebrating with Cristal like glued to our *fucking hands*. You’ll see.”

“Sounds good,” Matthew said. “Scary, ’cause once superglue gets on you, it’s like, really hard to take off. But still good.”

“Hell, yeah, it sounds good—it sounds great. Hand me another Bud,” Chris said, and Matthew reached in the back again, pulled another Bud out of the cooler, pulled the tab back and handed it to Chris.

“Thanks bro,” Chris said.

“Sure,” Matthew said.

After a few minutes of singing along with Tupac, Chris turned the music down and said, “I’m serious. You and me and the rest of the 505s. We gonna be living the high life. I’ve heard shit about guys who’ve worked their way up and got mansions on the edge of their reservations.”

“Really?” Matthew said, but he’d only spent a few days at a time on his mother’s reservation where she had lived until she was a teenager until her father had gotten a job in Farmington through a relocation program.

“Yeah, man, I mean, like I’m an urban Skin, but I know where I come from, you know what I mean?” Chris said, and took a long drink.

“Yeah,” Matthew said.

“You know son, suddenly I don’t feel like fooling with those goldiggin bitches up at the strip joint. What you say we head home and just have a few beers, kick back, and get mothafuckin high as hell.”

“Sounds good to me,” Matthew said, and Chris worked his mouth into an uneasy, crooked smile.

Matthew knew what was up. Chris was worried about Maria. But he didn’t want to admit it. Didn’t want to seem weak, call her.

Matthew thought about Maria and sighed, heavily. They weren’t far from home. Maybe when they got there, her car would be in the drive, and she would be sitting on the couch, a cigarette in one long brown hand, and an old paperback in the other. He looked out the window at the sagebrush, the red red earth, the beige mountains blurring past him as they sped home to the house they shared with the rest of the 505s.

But Maria wasn’t there. And though Chris tried not to show it, he was disappointed, hurt. Angry. And to be honest, though it made him feel strange, so was Matthew. Matthew had plopped down on one of their ratty couches, Chris on the other, adjacent to the one Matthew was sitting on. They were passing a joint back and forth. Matthew liked weed, though not nearly as much as Chris did. Chris liked to go on and on about all of the things it cured, including HIV and cancer, which Matthew highly doubted but said nothing to contradict. But along with the companionship he got from the guys, weed nearly killed Matthew’s usually insatiable desire for alcohol. That much it did cure.

“You remember your father?”

Matthew was silent for a while. Then, “A little. Yeah. I visited him once.”

“What was he like?”

“Well,” Matthew said, handing the joint back to Chris and lighting a cigarette, “I remember that him and my mom argued a lot, though he was gone by the time I was . . . I don’t know . . . I don’t remember. I was so young. But I know I look like him. He’s also got that *greeeasssy* black hair.”

“That’s for the ladies,” Chris said, and Matthew nodded.

“He’s Apache. Mescalero and Chiricahua. He lives here, actually, in Albuquerque.” Matthew exhaled and was silent for a moment. Then, “Well, he did live here. I guess he might still.”

Matthew had sought him out once. His father had grown up in Farmington, and as far as Matthew knew, had no interest in going back to his father’s reservation, the Mescalero reservation. He had been living in a tiny, shitty apartment in Albuquerque, his television his only company. They had sat there watching it, and drinking, until Matthew had left.

“I thought you were Nav, bro,” Chris said, taking another toke and gesturing with it toward Matthew, who shook his head no, as he was beginning to feel really, really high. Chris, he was never high enough.

“My mom’s Navajo. Though both of my parents are part white too,” he said.

“Ain’t no shame in that game,” Chris said. “Nah. No shame, no shame at all.”

“No. I guess not,” Mathew said, not really understanding why Chris was saying that. “And he was like me . . . kind of quiet. So maybe that’s why my mom always hated me.”

“Hmmm . . .”

Chris shifted on the couch, and looked at Matthew for a moment before responding. Matthew could tell he was getting to that point in his high where he might start rambling.

“Yeah. My mom was a bitch,” Chris said.

“Really?” Matthew said, feeling his stomach twist. He hated his mother too, but it always bothered him when Chris talked about his mother or Maria this way. Especially Maria.

“Yeah. She drank too, and I never even met my dad. He was Mexican. But I always wished he would come back and we could run away together, to some city like New York. I mean, I visited my mother’s people and there’s nothing to do on the reservation but herd sheep and work for Peabody coal and shit. And I ain’t into that. No way.”

Matthew laughed. “Yeah. I can’t picture you herding sheep.”

“Ya’ta’eehhhhhhh little cousin,” Chris said, sounding like one of those sweet old Diné guys you’d see in town doing errands with their wives sometimes.

“Yeah, man, like, with a cane and shit.”

“Here little sheepie,” Matthew said.

They both started laughing hysterically, Chris’s laugh ending in a long, harsh cough.

“Oh shit, oh, shit,” Chris said.

Once they’d both stopped laughing, Chris took another toke, gestured again to Matthew who again shook his head no and said, “Speaking of bitches, I’m a call mine.”

“Oh,” Matthew said, feeling his stomach twist again. He had hoped Chris had let it go. Matthew grew silent, and Chris took yet another toke, then set the joint down. Maria had grown up in a foster home in Albuquerque. She had met Chris at a party when they were twelve and they had been together, relatively speaking, ever since. She was tough. She carried Chris’s gun for him in her giant purse. She carried a short, wide knife in there too—but that was for her.

“I’m a call that bitch,” Chris said, repeating himself, and Matthew sighed, heavily.

Chris dug his phone out of the pocket of his oversized khakis, and sat with it to his ear. Finally, Maria picked up.

“Where you at?” Then, “So, get out of it. You told me you was going to be here. So? Get the fuck over here!” Chris’s expression turned from one of frustration to pure rage. “Fuck you? Fuck you too, bitch!” He threw the phone across the room. It hit the yellowing wall and landed a few feet from Matthew.

“Stupid bitch!”

“Maybe . . . maybe she’s just high,” Matthew offered, tentatively.

Chris looked at him with fire in his eyes. “Ishkeh, don’t *ever* tell me about my woman!”

Matthew nodded but felt something like anger, though he pushed it down, away.

“She’s always fucking high! She can’t control herself! What the fuck is wrong with her? I went through shit! Terrible shit! And I still got control. I told her to get off the fucking H! That shit is nothing but death, and that’s something we sell to other people, weak motherfuckers. There’s one thing I can’t respect and that is, man or woman, a bitch with no control.” Chris lifted the joint and sucked violently, looking so much like a baby with a bottle that Matthew had to refrain from laughing. After a few minutes, Chris seemed to calm down. His phone rang from across the room, the ring tone “Gold Digger.” Chris walked over, scooped it up from the old, gray carpet, answered and said nothing, his expression petulant, sullen. Matthew could hear Maria on the other side, the silvery phone large in Chris’s short, wide hand.

“So are you coming?”

Matthew watched him, Chris’s expression one of anxiousness.

“Cool,” he said, and hung up. “She’s coming,” he said, and as hardcore as he wanted to look, he seemed relieved. Matthew knew everything about this routine. He remembered it from his childhood. His mom had played it out with man after man.

Chris sat down and hung his head between his knees, the way you’re supposed to do on a plane in the event of a crash. He ran his short, brown hand over his shaved head and took another hit from his pipe—the dank green smell filling the room like a fog.

“Crazy bitch,” he said, but Matthew could hear how happy he was.

“You like crazy bitches,” Matthew said, offering a kind of apology.

“Yeah, I do. I really do. If they ain’t crazy, they ain’t no fun.”

Matthew sighed. Chris was sucking on his joint again, and as Matthew stared at his wide, childlike face, the hate began to boil up, just a bit. He closed his eyes. With Chris he felt for the first time in his life that he had a home, a family, that he belonged. He had gotten his first tat with Chris, looking up while the silver needle drove into his skin and smiled, thinking of all of the times Chris would try and wrestle with him the way a dad might've, or an older brother, his short muscular arms pulling Matthew's tall skinny frame into a headlock. Matthew would laugh, and struggle, and tell him to fuck the fuck off, but he loved it.

He opened his eyes and reached for the joint. He wondered how this night would turn out. Probably not well.