



the
**ROGUE
SHOP**

MICHAEL KNUDSEN

a novel

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SHOP**

MICHAEL KNUDSEN

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ONE

The Chinese say that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The first step of my thousand-mile journey was to reject the pleas of the good woman who raised me and climb aboard a Greyhound headed out of Houston in the summer of 1991.

Sunlight warmed me through the window all the way to Fort Worth, where I transferred to a second jam-packed bus. On this leg of the trip, I wound up in an aisle seat next to a fat man, with Elvis-like sideburns, who occupied all of his seat and most of mine. This left my right buttock unsupported for two hundred miles. The guy had an epiglottis the size of a serrano pepper, to hear him snore. In Wichita Falls I disembarked and used the bathroom. I stopped for a few seconds in front of a single unoccupied pay phone and fingered the change in my pocket. The feeling was too much like working up the guts to ask a girl to dance. Before I could make myself move, Jumbo Elvis shouldered past me and eclipsed the phone. I got back on the bus.

We drove onward to Amarillo as the sun blushed and dipped into the Western horizon, a horizon displaying nothing but endless barbwire fences, irrigation pipes, and the occasional mud-spattered cow. Elvis's journey went

elsewhere from Wichita Falls, and the mousy lady next to me now had no interest in anything beyond the inside of her black sleeping mask. Stuck with myself for hours, I soon despised the company. In Pueblo I wolfed down a chili dog and a cup of coffee. In Colorado Springs I didn't even bother to leave my seat. My spine protested so much sitting, and my brain complained of the sorry excuse for sleep I was getting. I was lethargic and not ready to confront those pay phones. Why was I running from the only family I had?

"I need to start my own life," I had told Aunt Jean when I first informed her I would not be applying to any in-state schools. "I'm twenty years old."

"Why?" she shot back. "Why not stay here, or at least stay close by? Why do you want to be so far from us?"

I couldn't articulate the answer. She hit me with "why?" so many times that summer, the word came to mean nothing, its interrogative hook fishing for something in me that just wasn't biting.

In June, responses to the dozen applications I had sent out arrived. No from Yale, no from Stanford—no big surprises there. Didn't hurt to try. My grades had been perfect in my last two years of high school, but I was never what you would call a student leader. Flawless academics but thin on the extracurricular resume. Yes from Kentucky, yes from Illinois and Michigan, but none with substantial financial aid. Yes from Tennessee, with a decent scholarship. Yes from Utah, with an academic full-ride for tuition.

"Utah," my aunt had repeated after I showed her the letter, her eyes nose wrinkled. "Oh no, Chris. Not *Utah*."

The free tuition deal had me so excited that at first I didn't know what her problem was. Utah—hundreds of miles away in a part of the West I knew nothing about. I had always wanted to climb mountains and had fantasies of hopping from one granite boulder to the next until the final jagged points of earth met sky. Aunt Jean's eyes begged me to stay as she dropped the letter from Salt Lake City onto the kitchen table. She looked as if she had discovered the letter had been sealed by the tongue of Lucifer himself.

Of course.

Salt Lake City was the world headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My aunt had a thing about Mormons. Whenever a pair of the white-shirted, clean-cut missionaries tag-teamed through our neighborhood, she turned off the lights, and we stopped whatever we were doing. She held a finger to her lips to keep us quiet while they knocked, knocked again, and then left. To her, it was spiritual self-defense. She had been a staunch member of the Calvary Station Baptist Church, pastored by the Reverend Jacob Ahlers, since before I had come to live with her.

Ahlers' God was a jealous one, a God who resided in the pages of holy writ and in the hearts of believers and nowhere else. Those interloping sects with more creative approaches to the Bible and interpretations at odds with his own seminary training were, in his mind, cults that not only had to be avoided but confronted. Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Seventh-day Adventists were the biggest and most nefarious of the lot, with Mormons enjoying the hottest corner of the pastor's hell.

Ahlers held Wednesday night “cult prevention” seminars in which he exposed their heresies and weaved a rhetorical shield of immunity against them in the minds of his congregation. The red-headed reverend was never more passionate than when he preached against Mormonism. He didn’t bother with Philistines or worshippers of Baal; instead, he trained his laserlike focus on modern spiritual dangers that sought to scour the craniums and pollute the souls of unsuspecting Christians. These were practical enemies upon which the flammable pastor would have called down Elijah’s fireballs, if such power had been granted to humble preachers. Aunt Jean was Ahlers’ verbatim disciple, and she would sooner invite an entire tattoo-covered street gang to dinner than a Mormon widow.

Knowing it was down to Tennessee and Utah, she became a volunteer for the University of Tennessee Volunteers. With a 40 percent Baptist population, I would be safely cinched inside the Bible Belt. She’d been to Knoxville once with her parents and described it as a splendid paradise of rolling green hills, wide rivers, peerless academic opportunities, and oh yes, gaggles of clean Christian young women.

Tennessee held no allure for me aside from the young women, of course, but I figured I could find those anywhere. The truth I didn’t admit to my aunt is that I wanted to get out of the South altogether. Utah, with its high-altitude desert climate and snow-capped peaks, resonated with something inside of me. I made my decision and sent my acceptance. After a week of nervous procrastination, I told Aunt Jean. She didn’t pout or cry. She nodded with tight lips. Her conversations with me over the ensuing days were clipped and unemotional but filled with persuasive arguments

designed to appeal to my rational side. Meanwhile her conversations with God were long, eloquent, and peppered with my name. She often told my cousins and me that all of her prayers were answered. This time I guess they weren't because here I was on this unstoppable bus to Utah, the engine as smooth as if lubricated with butter, the transmission shifting up and down with flawless efficiency through the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

For reasons of my own, I considered myself neither a Baptist nor a Christian. That was why she worried so much. Between Amarillo and Pueblo, I mulled over the years of my life and began to feel like more of a heel and an ingrate with each passing mile marker. By Colorado Springs I knew I had some things I needed to say to my aunt but couldn't quite make myself do it. By the time the bus roared into the main station in Denver, all those hours of sober contemplation had pickled me resolute. Almost I wished for a magical transfer onto a bus headed to Tennessee.

Against the urgent suggestions of my bladder, I staggered off and headed straight to the bank of pay phones next to the ticket counter. I deposited enough change to connect me to my aunt's double-wide in Cloverleaf. My stomach roiled in rebellion against the continued presence of the Pueblo chili dog, compounded by pervasive cigarette smoke, the squeal of rubber on concrete, diesel fumes, and the need to make this phone call.

Elizabeth, my cousin, answered before the second ring. No surprise there—the caller was four out of five times one of her current or hopeful boyfriends, making a pitch to get himself on her full calendar. A little gawky and unremarkable as a younger girl, in her senior year at David

Crockett High she had blossomed into someone her male classmates found hard to ignore.

“Hi, Liz.”

“Chris, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Where are you?”

“Denver.”

With the small talk done, the line went quiet. Liz wouldn’t have much more to say to me. I was two years older and had been what I felt was the equivalent of an adequate older brother to her. She was her mother’s daughter. She had worried and made strong arguments for Tennessee.

“Well,” she said, “I guess you want to talk to Mom. Tommy’s over at Eric’s.”

“How is she?”

“What do you think? She’s been crying.”

“Liz, I—”

“What are you going to say to her?”

“That’s between me and her.”

I’m pretty sure my cousin planted her free hand on her hip. “Right now, I’ve got the phone, and it’s between me and you.”

I let out a big sigh that blew what had to be an irritating electronic static into my cousin’s ear. “I’m going to tell her what she needs to hear. Good things. Now will you please put her on the line?”

She waited another beat. “Hold on. And Chris, you know I want the best for you, same as Mom. You’re my brother, as much as Tommy is.”

My stomach felt much better now. “I know. I love you too, Liz.”

While she called for Aunt Jean, I collected my thoughts. People were lined up behind me to use the phone. A skinny kid in a T-shirt advertising the rock band Ratt stood just inside the border of my personal space, looking like he wanted to punch me. A mop of greasy brown hair hit his shoulders. What was it with black T-shirts, anger, and low body fat? Behind him, a short Native American woman wrapped in a colorful blanket didn't look any happier. She held up a brown arm from which dangled a bracelet of sterling charms, and pointed first at the bracelet, which as far as I could tell did not include a timepiece of any kind, and then at the sign above the pay phones that read “three minute limit.”

“Nice bracelet,” I said. Then I turned back to the phone as Aunt Jean came on.

“Chris? Are you all right? Where are you?”

“I'm fine, Aunt Jean. I'm in Denver. Listen, there's something I need to tell you.” I leaned into the phone bank and lowered my voice, since Ratt-fan was rolling his eyes and could hear every word. I had a few pearls to cast and Ratt-fan was definitely swine. “I want you to know how thankful I am for everything you've done for me. From the day I came into your family, I've felt nothing but acceptance, and you're the only mother I can really remember. I know it wasn't easy, especially when I—well, when I was acting the way I did. I know I made things hard on you with my choices, some of them stupid choices. I know my decision about church has caused you a lot of stress and worry. I'm sorry, Aunt Jean. I'm sorry.”

Silence crackled and popped along the hundreds of miles of copper and fiber-optic cable between Houston and Denver. I had my aunt in tears, but I hoped they were good tears.

Someone tapped me so hard on the shoulder that a bruise the next day wouldn't come as a surprise. I turned to find Ratt-fan's blank eyes and the interior of his flared pink nostrils inches from my own face. Behind him, I caught the acid glare from Indian Woman, twin black braids hanging in front of her shoulders like the frayed ends of lynching ropes.

Aunt Jean found her voice. "Thank you, Chris. I needed to hear that from you today. I'm sorry too. Sorry for however I've failed you."

"You haven't failed me, Aunt Jean." She was thinking about the church. Her thoughts always came back to Jesus and his gospel of sacrifice and forgiveness—a gospel I had rejected at the age of fourteen in favor of alcohol. A gospel I continued to reject because I couldn't buy the myth of forgiveness. Looking to Jesus to expunge my sins was a cop-out, and I wasn't going to pretend that anyone could just step in and take responsibility for my own stupid actions. "You haven't failed me, and you didn't push me away. I just need time. Time and a new place. I'll be fine. I'll make you proud. I'll do my—"

Please deposit an additional fifty cents to continue your call, interrupted a lifeless male recording.

"I know you will, Chris. You've turned yourself around, and I know your parents would be proud of you—" she caught herself speaking of the dead as if they were dead, "*—are* proud of you."

I located two more quarters in my pocket and fed the phone's greedy mouth. "Aunt Jean, I know you're stressed about the Utah thing. I don't want you to worry about it anymore."

"You're going to a place where Christians are a minority," she said after the smallest hesitation.

That'll put me in the majority, I almost told her. Instead, I took a deep breath. "What can I do to make you feel better about that?"

"Promise me. If you won't promise me you'll go to a good Baptist church, at least promise me you'll stay away from them."

"Them?"

"You know what I mean, Chris. The Mormons."

"I promise."

"Do you swear it?"

"I swear it, okay?"

"Swear you will never become a Mormon."

It was more likely I'd become a vegan. "Don't be ridiculous, Aunt Jean. I'm not going to become a Mormon."

"Swear it on the Bible."

"Why? Doesn't the Bible say something about not swear—"

"I don't care if it does. Swear it."

I sighed and turned around. All I could see were the wrathful faces of Ratt-fan and Scowling Woman. "Does anybody have a Bible?" I shouted between them. Most of the faces in the pay phone lines turned toward me and returned blank looks. A couple of people stepped backward.

Not Ratt-fan. “Look, Moses, we don’t have time for Sunday school here. Are you done with that phone?”

“A Bible!” I shouted again, ignoring the mad bull before me. Behind Ratt-fan, the Native American woman rummaged in the folds of her blanket. She brought her dark, braceleted hand out and extended it to me. I matched Ratt-fan glare for glare as I reached past his bony shoulder to take what she offered. “One more minute,” I said, and turned toward the phone.

I held a red, travel-worn and dog-eared softcover Gideon’s New Testament. “I have a Bible, Aunt Jean. Right here.”

Please deposit an additional fifty cents to continue your call.

I pounded the phone with my fist. “I just did that! Can you hear me, Aunt Jean?”

“I’m here, Chris.”

I raised my shoulder to hold the phone against my ear, held the tiny book in one hand, and fished for some change with the other. Ratt-fan was now asking no one in particular with a loud whine if there was an actual time limit on the phones. I came up with a nickel and two pennies. In desperation I jammed them in the slot, knowing full well they’d be rejected. I held up the tattered little book in my right hand. “I’m holding the Bible in my hand. I, Christopher Alan Kerry, do solemnly swear that I will never become a—”

Please deposit an additional fifty cents now or your call will be terminated.

“A Mormon! Did you hear me, Aunt Jean?”

“I heard part of it. Enough of it.”

“I’m out of quarters. I’ll call you after I get to Salt Lake.”

“I love you, Chris. You know that.”

“I do. And I—”

The line went dead.

I held the receiver in my hand for a second or two before Ratt-fan wrestled it away from me and yelled, “FINALLY!” with enough drama to make his guitar idols proud.

I stepped back and handed the little book to the Native American woman. “Thanks.” She flashed a smile and revealed a gold-capped front tooth. A polished silver crucifix glinted at me from a leather strap around her neck. I realized she hadn’t been angry at me. The stern look on her face was something she had inherited from stoic ancestors. Her belief in Jesus wasn’t.

After a quick visit to the men’s room, I found my way back to the right Greyhound and climbed aboard. I’d had nothing since the chili dog in Amarillo, but I wasn’t the least bit hungry.



A cabbie outside the station in Salt Lake City gave me terse directions to the nearest motel by throwing a tobacco-stained thumb over his shoulder toward the mountains.

Eastward I walked along a blistering sidewalk. The evening sun stretched my shadow out to ten feet in front of me, and it listed a little to the left under the weight of the duffel. The sight of a 7-Eleven sign caused my mouth to flood. I hadn’t eaten all day, and my stomach felt as concave as an ice cream scoop. I detoured into the dingy little convenience store and bought a po’boy and a bottle of Coke. On the way out, I grabbed a copy of

the free local rental magazine and stuffed it in an outside pocket of my bag. The sandwich was gone in four bites, and I drained the Coke just as I reached the humble façade of the Temple Vu motel. If sometime in its storied past this dump had offered a “Vu” of any temple, it had long since been obstructed by a three-level concrete parking garage. The U-shaped clapboard building had been whitewashed so many times that its corners were slightly rounded. The exterior wooden door to each room was protected by a cheap screen door, most looking like they’d been riddled by screen-chomping caterpillars.

My heart lifted. The place would be within my budget.

Exhausted and slick with sweat, I walked beneath a neon tube sputtering the word “vacancy” and through a spring-loaded porch door that squealed enough to make a service bell redundant. A fiftyish woman with huge plastic-rimmed glasses sat behind the counter. She was reading a paperback with a cover depicting a busty belle within milliseconds of having her unlaced bodice forcibly removed by a shirtless man with chiseled pectorals and a windblown mane of blond hair. She quoted me the rate of thirty dollars, which I removed from my wallet without giving her a view of how much it contained. She handed me a key tethered to a leather strip on which “Temple Vu #7” had been stamped.

Non-smoking was my only request of the romance addict. Tobacco was one bad habit I had never picked up, even during my drinking days. I crossed the threshold of #7, bolted the door behind me, and took a deep breath. It was hotter than it was outside. Apparently, they had just made the room “non-smoking” especially for me that day. The place reeked of decades

of neurotic puffing, and a scuzzy smoked-glass ashtray sat on the nightstand—a bald-faced lie.

I teetered and almost stomped back to the office to interrupt the antebellum lust-fest and demand another room. Then common sense prevailed, and I dropped my duffel to the floor with a sigh. There was no better room. What did I expect for thirty bucks?

Fresh cool air rattled in once I had cranked on the window-mounted AC unit. The bed was covered with clean sheets and the bathroom looked usable. I used it, showered, brushed my teeth, and donned a clean pair of boxer shorts. I drank a full glass of water and fell on the bed.

I reached for the rental magazine and perused the tiny pictures of buildings and brief apartment descriptions. Prices were a little steeper than I'd hoped for, except the dumpiest places. My heart sank when I checked the map of the city against the numbered vacancies and realized that rents increased in direct proportion to the building's proximity to the University campus. A run-down studio was going to cost me two hundred a month, probably two-fifty. Security deposits were at least a hundred. Furnished places started around three hundred, but who needed furniture?

My wallet was still in my jeans pocket, so I yanked it out and removed my cash. I counted out the bills, keeping them in proper denomination order. Ones, fives, tens, twenties, fifties. I'd done this before I left home but felt a compulsion to do it again. The amount was only down the price of a chili dog and a coffee, a po'boy and a Coke, and one decrepit motel room. Still, what remained seemed so little. Just a pile of scraps of paper. It was all I had in the world outside of that duffel bag—all that remained after a hard

year of work at the Krystal Kleen Kar Wash minus what it took to keep the family in our trailer and groceries for six months while Aunt Jean had been out of work.

There was no fighting my weighted eyelids. I fell asleep there in my boxers, *For Rent* opened across my bare chest, and fourteen hundred ninety-three dollars clutched in my right hand.

❧ TWO ❧

My eyes opened, and I became aware of two things: the brown water-stain on the flocked ceiling resembled the shape of Mexico, down to the little Baja peninsula running down its left side; and I had left the AC on all night and was freezing. I reached for the brown blanket and pulled it over me, sending US currency fluttering all over the bed and floor around it. Getting out of bed was not quite an option yet. I stretched and tried to recapture the feeling of the dream I'd just come out of—a dream I'd had many times going as far back as I could remember that was always the same and always left me bittersweet with longing.

Every time, it started with me walking alone into a palatial room. I stopped and looked around. All four walls of the room appeared to be made of marble but with a glow of light shining from translucent depths, illuminating the natural striations and mineral veins in the stone.

From nowhere, my parents joined me, my father taking my right hand in his, my mother my left. First, I looked up at her, basking in the love radiating from her face. Her nose wrinkled in the kind of smile mothers reserve for their little boys. Dark hair framed her face and fell over her shoulders. Her eyes then rose to look at my father with a different kind of

love. I turned to meet his eyes and watched him regard my mother with open admiration for a few seconds before he dropped his gaze to me. He was a military man, combat veteran, and trained killer of other human beings. Yet his expression conveyed nothing to me but pride and affection for his only son. His rugged face was just as it was in the few photos I had but softened by the reflected light from his brilliant robe and the flow of light from the surrounding stone. The angle at which I looked up at them told me that in my dream I was three years old, my age the last time I had seen my parents alive.

At once the three of us became aware of a fourth person in the room. A tall, white-haired man smiled at us, eyes brimming with wisdom and laughter. He didn't seem to notice that hundreds, if not thousands of white winged insects crowded around his feet and legs in silence, so thick in their fluttering flight that they were nearly a solid surface—in fact, none flew higher than the level of his waist, creating a flat tabletop of powdery, flexing wings surrounding him for at least a three-foot radius.

I looked at my parents in turn and each smiled at me and nodded. As if I had never wanted anything more in my life, I broke free from their grips and ran to the man, who raised his hands, palms up, inviting me. The instant I hit the edge of the mass of tiny butterflies they exploded upward, dusting me with thousands of powdery wings and gossamer antennae. There was no fear, just pure happiness, and I heard the sound of a child's voice, tickled in body and spirit, my voice ringing through the warm, marbled room. Blinded by infinite wings, I could no longer see my parents or the white-suited man, but I felt their love wash over me, pure and undiluted. In

that moment, I was the center of creation, the pride and joy of my parents' lives. I laughed a hearty tear-filled laughter not as if at something funny, but at something unexpected and grand, as if I had won all the lotteries in the world at once. And these were lotteries not of money but of affection and attention. There was no fear it wouldn't continue forever.

It always ended when I awoke, and the letdown bruised my heart a little every time. It certainly hurt that first morning in Salt Lake City, looking up at the little outline of Mexico and seeing the uncannily accurate curves of the Rio Grande defining the Southern border of Texas on the bulging ceiling tiles. In reality I had no living mother or father, no white-haired man welcoming me to *Fantasy Island* like Ricardo Montalban.

I got up, pulled on my jeans, and collected the scattered cash. There was nothing to complain about in the way Aunt Jean had raised me. I'd always felt like the oldest of her children. Aunt Jean had read to us from the Bible, dressed us up, hauled us to Calvary Station on Sundays, and shown us the divide between right and wrong with her own example. Her husband, who wouldn't go to church with us and eventually decided monogamy was not his cup of bourbon, left her while she was still in her twenties with two children of her own and one of her sister's. Within a year he was showing up less frequently than his child support checks, and then even those become spotty and finally ceased. Still my aunt forged onward, working two jobs most of the time. No, I had no cause to feel I wasn't loved or taken care of.

Still, there was an agonizing void left by the absence of my parents, who had left me with a babysitter one Saturday night to attend a play off-base in

Lafayetteville and had not come back.

Their faces in my dream were real. I had pictures of them so I knew what they looked like. The love they lavished on me in the marble room was so real, so warm, and so different from what my aunt, Tommy, or Liz could offer. There was nothing on earth I would trade the dream for. It was one thing I could count on, maybe once or twice a month, like a vitamin pill that really worked. A day that opened with the dream was a day on which I could carry those feelings with me for hours.

The dream was a good omen for my first day in Salt Lake City.



Five hours later I peered into a dark little space that had just been described to me as a “walk-in closet.” Sure, I could walk in, almost a full step. I might even be able to turn around if I never hung clothes on the bowed pipes spanning both sides of the closet. “Nice,” I said. An obvious mouse-hole in one corner caught my eye. A tidy pile of droppings lay just outside, as if the rodents had chopped and stacked firewood for the coming winter. “Any problem with mice in here?”

The landlady, a sweet older woman with dye-tinged hair, smiled to reveal oversized too-perfect dentures and blushed. She was incapable of lying to me. “I’ll be honest, we’ve seen a few. The kids downstairs like having them around, and I’m afraid they’ve been feeding them. They do no harm if you keep them out of the kitchen. We’d be happy to provide some traps.”

I disagreed but said nothing. Wall-dwelling vermin who marked their territory by chewing holes in the structure and crapping willy-nilly around my home did harm in my worldview. My wristwatch showed one in the

afternoon. I'd already toured seven unacceptable places, none better than this. Here I was, trailer trash, and I didn't think I could live in a place like this even if it was only three blocks from the edge of campus. My aunt's mandatory standards for cleanliness had spoiled me, but the nice landlady didn't deserve a hard time.

"Can I see the bathroom?"

She nodded once and dropped eye contact. So, the bathroom was not going to be a major selling point.

Sure enough, the toilet had faint reddish streaks down the outside of the bowl, as if it had once starred in a low-budget horror movie in which it had overflowed with blood. The entire apparatus did not appear to be bolted to the floor. For kicks I flushed it. A mass of water dashed around the bowl and exited with an angry growl. I turned to the bathtub and ran some hot water from the encrusted faucet to see how it drained. It didn't.

I stood and smiled the smile that said I'd seen enough. "Thanks for showing me the place, ma'am. I've got one more to look at, so I may be back later."

The lady returned my smile, knowing darn well our paths were not likely to cross again. "Such a polite young man. Are you from down South somewhere?"

"Texas, ma'am." I lifted a hand to tip an imaginary ten-gallon hat.

She giggled like a little girl. "You don't have much of an accent."

"I can turn the drawl on and off at will," I said, drawl disabled.

"You sure can. Why Salt Lake City, if I may ask?"

"I've got a scholarship at the U. And it's far from home."

She studied me a moment, maternal curiosity and concern bubbling just beneath the surface. She shoved them both down deep. “Well, I hope everything works out for you.”

“I’m much obliged,” I drawled.



The last apartment circled in my disintegrating copy of *For Rent* was the furthest from campus and closest to downtown. The picture in the magazine didn’t tell me much. It showed a black mass surrounded by a few trees, as if the photographer had purposely snapped the shot at dusk to hide structural flaws. It did not bode well.

The UTA bus dropped me between 400 and 500 East on South Temple Street. Already I was getting the hang of finding my way around this city of square, consistent-sized blocks numbered 100, 200, 300, and so on in each direction. With the mountains for reference and the fail-safe logic of the grid system, who could get lost?

The dry heat wore me out. I had ridden and hiked all over the city and I dreaded another night at the Temple Vu. My goal was to have an apartment signed for by the end of this first day, as unrealistic as it might be. I tramped down Fourth East, well aware that I had the aura of a hobo with the worn military bag slung over one shoulder, stubble on my face, and wrinkled clothes.

The city was a mixture of old and new, here a nineteenth-century mansion, there a twenty-story glass and steel high rise. The streets were lavishly wide, enough for five cars to pass side-by-side. The place was clean and unhurried, and the people so far had been quite pleasant, considering I

came from a part of the country where hospitality was legendary. I had no gripe with Salt Lake City—I just didn't have an apartment, and options were growing thin.

Another intersection, another half block, and there I was, standing in front of the two-story building that was my destination. I wouldn't have recognized it from the photo, so I double-checked the address. The building was an art-deco style cube dating from the 1930s. A wrought iron archway over the front entrance proclaimed "Ivy Place." The name fit, as the place was overgrown by climbing swaths of green-blue English Ivy, cut back from the windows and doors but otherwise unrestrained for decades. I caught a glimpse of several vines, as thick as my upper arm, buried in the foliage.

I climbed a short flight of crooked concrete steps to the front entrance, a glass swinger you'd find at a strip mall. A single sheet of lined paper ripped from a spiral notebook was taped at eye level. "Apartment for Rent. See Manager #1" was written on it with a black chisel marker. Loud music came from inside. I opened the door and identified the tune as Herb Alpert's *Lonely Bull*. I walked across a mail alcove between two banks of quaint built-in mailboxes and into a dark corridor with worn carpet the color of red wine. The first door on the left was adorned with a tarnished brass "1." This apartment was also the source of the music, which bulged against the door.

I knocked hard and waited. I knocked again, harder. Just before my third attempt, the door swung inward and released a wave of Latinized trumpet blasts that pushed me back a full step into the hallway. A short, broad brown man with coal-black curly hair and a thick mustache, wearing only a

white tank, a gold rope neck-chain, and Hawaiian print shorts, regarded me with a suspicious eye.

“I’m here about the apartment for rent,” I shouted.

He cupped a big hand behind his ear and squinted at me.

“The apartment!” I screamed. “I’d like to take a look!”

He still couldn’t hear me, and it was no big surprise considering Herb, his amigos of the Tijuana Brass, and their amplifiers doing their thing in the background. The squat little man held his palm up to my face, indicating either “wait a sec” or “go away.” He retreated into the horn-torn gloom of his apartment, leaving the door open. I heard the screech of a stylus being removed from a vinyl record followed by a blessed flood of silence. Something was muttered in Spanish and then a booming woman’s voice. “Pablo! Why’d you turn it off?”

“Relax, Querida. I’m showing the vacancy. Be back in a minute.” He rummaged for something in the dark kitchen, just inside the door.

I tallied my second thoughts about looking at this place when movement to my left caught my attention. Two young women had entered the building and stopped to check their mailbox. Both wore sport shorts with matching red polo shirts and carried covered tennis racquets. They retrieved a few envelopes and started toward me. Seeing me standing there in all my awkwardness, they said “Hi” with the unison of sisters, but they didn’t look like sisters. Within a split second the taller of the two took in my battered duffel and rumpled attire and looked me in the face, but I felt curiosity rather than judgment. I mumbled something as they passed, and my eyes by

nature followed them as they bounded up the stairway. Long legs. Athletic strides.

“Nice looking, ain’t they?”

I turned to find the little Mexican smiling at me. I found myself at a loss for words.

“Course, I shouldn’t talk,” he said in a whisper, “I’m *married*.” He pulled the door shut behind him, jingling a big ring of keys in his other hand. “Sorry about that. Most of the tenants don’t get home ’til after five, and she likes that stuff turned up freaky loud.” He nodded toward the stairs. “It’s Number Nine.”

I followed his furry legs up one flight, around a landing and up to the top level. He made a sharp right and stopped at the first door, marked “9.” He fumbled with the keys and nodded toward Number Sixteen directly across the narrow hallway. “In case you’re wondrin’, and I know you are, that’s where those two cuties live.”

Sight unseen, the perceived value of the apartment skyrocketed.

My brief tour of the interior did nothing to bring it down. The place was immaculate and inviting compared with everything else I’d suffered through that day. It even showed signs of being updated since Pearl Harbor, maybe around the time Neil Armstrong took his giant leap. No trace of tobacco stench. The kitchen appliances were old but in working order, and the toilet looked like something I could use without protection. The tub was no charmer with its rusty splotches in the bottom and black grout framing most of the lower avocado-colored tiles, but someone had given it a good scrub, and it was as clean as it was going to get. Original steel radiators sat

in the bedroom and living room, and Pablo confirmed the place was still steam-heated. Not that cold would be a concern anytime soon. I cranked on the window-mounted swamp cooler to confirm it worked, and within a few minutes the temperature in the living room dropped into the bearable eighties. Best of all, there was an eight-foot bright orange sofa with a bas-relief floral design and half-moon cushions sitting against a wall in the living room.

“Is this included?” I asked.

Pablo looked as surprised as I was to see the sofa. “My wife checked out the people who moved outta here last month. They must’ve left it. It could be yours now, no extra charge.” He winked with the entire left side of his face with enough force to crack a walnut.

The worn orange relic of the seventies would sure beat sleeping on the floor. I could find no reason not to rent the place on the spot. The intriguing neighbors, the sofa, and the fact that I had no place left to go sealed the deal. “Two sixty-five a month, right? With a hundred-fifty deposit?” I was terrified that the quote from *For Rent* had been a gross misprint.

“That’s right,” Pablo said, and I exhaled. “But it has to be all cash,” he added, as if irritated by a recent trend of new tenants offering live poultry in lieu of currency.

I shrugged off my duffel onto the sofa, a huge relief to my shoulder and neck. This was one of the moments I’d fantasized about for months—renting my first apartment, on my own. Number Nine Ivy Place was mine. I reached for the outside zippered compartment of my father’s Air Force duffel. Earlier that morning, after a hearty breakfast at McDonald’s, I had

transferred my wallet from my back pocket to that compartment because I felt it was safer there. I went to unzip the compartment and found it unzipped. My heart jackhammered my tonsils as I shoved my hand in and pulled out the entire contents—a half-eaten and liquefied Snickers bar folded in its wrapper and two napkins embossed with the Golden Arches.

No wallet.

I checked my jeans, front and back, and then my shirt. Pablo stood by with an amused smile while I frisked myself. Alive with panic, I pulled everything out of the main compartment of the duffel and tossed it out of my way. Shirts, pants, shorts, balled socks, underwear, dress shoes, suit coat. Slow, cruel reality sunk its talons into the fragile bubble of my hope. That weak bubble popped as I turned the empty bag inside out and found no wallet. Fourteen hundred some-odd dollars, gone.

“Hey, Pablo, just the handyman I was looking for.”

It was the tall one. The curious one. She stood in the doorway of what until very recently was to be my living room. She took in the clothing-littered room and her good-natured smile froze when her gaze came to rest upon the jockstrap perched like an albino lizard sunning itself on the arm of the sofa.

Somehow she managed to raise untroubled green eyes to me. “Oh, I’m sorry. Hello.” She switched eye contact to her building manager. “Um—Pablo, when you get a chance, can you check out our AC? It’s doing the same thing again.”

Pablo broke a cheesy grin. “You bet, sweetie. I’ll be right over. I’m just wrapping up a transaction here with your new neighbor.”

“Oh.” She looked at me again. “Well, then, welcome to the neighborhood.” I could tell she thought about introducing herself, but my blanched and devastated face must have repelled her. “We’ll, uh, talk later.” She disappeared before I could respond. Not that I’d have been a chatterbox had she lingered.

“Hey, man, you lose your wad?” Pablo looked concerned.

A compulsion seized me, a need to run down the stairs, out of the building, and retrace each step I’d taken since I walked out of Mickey D’s that morning. I dropped to my knees and began stuffing everything back into the duffel. “I want this apartment, Pablo, but I’ll have to come back later.” I hoped I didn’t sound like I was about to cry. I zipped the main compartment and threw the bag over my shoulder with malice. “I’d appreciate it if you’d hold it for me.”

“I don’t know,” Pablo said. “I can’t hold it past tonight. If someone else comes in, you know, I gotta rent the place.”

I rounded on him from the entry to the kitchen. “Please. Just until tonight.”

“Okay, man. We lock the doors at ten.”

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