

# Chapter 1

What's in a name? A beautiful girl by any name is still beautiful, and an awkward name on a beautiful girl gives her mystery, but a beautiful name on an awkward girl invites disappointment. I don't know where to classify myself. *I leave that to others.*

I'm called Natalya. Friends shorten it to: *Nat.*

The ash-filled winds from the Sonora Desert carry my name down the burning slopes of the Laguna Mountains, west across a disordered San Diego County, over the Del Mar Fairgrounds and out to the Pacific Ocean, spreading ash and name along the California coast.

California has restricted out-of-state visitors for the past year, while monitoring her neighboring states descent into chaos. With the latest riots in LA and Silicon Valley, the California counties are now barricading themselves from one another, like feudal cities of the past. My family is now separated.

I'm standing in the fairgrounds and at the cry: "Tom Boy!" I turn to look at a thickly built blond haired boy waving clinched hand with the thumb and little finger sticking out. His name is Party Boy. I return the salute. He says, "I'm getting some cotton-candy and then I'm outta this fair and back to the beach." We nod our hands toward one another and we both look up to the eastern sky and watch three Marine Corps Jets streak overhead at one thousand feet. My glance follows the sound trailing the jets, and when I finally look back—he's gone. The jets were so low that I can smell their humid exhaust falling to earth. It's the smell of foreboding death.

I'm dressed to the sevens wearing my yellowish white baseball cap with the fiery red words, *Windanseabeach*, blazoned across the front, set at an angle across my Rasta hair. My faded yellow short-sleeve cotton T-shirt with the lettering, *tourist go home, leave your coin*, stenciled across the front, is tight against my body and tucked into my ripped blue jeans that enclose my long legs for a short person. My new blue suede tennis shoes cover the dark brown skin of my feet—sans socks. I never dress to the nines or tens. I know that nobody is perfect, especially me, and flaws are what make a person stand out. I'm almost sixteen: about three weeks until Christmas Eve for my birthday—with no hormones kicking in: no tits, no hips and no boys of interest.

I'm watching three sailor boys on 24-hour leave from one of the nuclear aircraft carriers, the USS Abraham Lincoln, that patrol 24/7 off the San Diego coast. Their ship is anchored one mile off the Del Mar beach, floating in the water like some gray behemoth watching the natives. They take turns at the High Striker, screaming their lungs out at their limited shore leave, drinking their coveted Mexican beers, and

throwing their mallets against the lever in a quest to outmuscle one another. They curse the game, they curse the wars, they curse the dearth of Tijuana whores. The viruses have chased the latter back into the Jalisco Mountains where their families live in a village of adobe huts and mountain stream drinking water.

Ironic that in a new world where there is so much information available to anyone with a signal, that no person, no entity, no government knows how the end began. Things got real serious about three years ago. Even the Pollyanna's of the world started to frown at the daily news. Facts, alternative facts, network news, internet fake news, outright lies and fabrications wove different stories. Enough truth in each story to make it impossible to sift out the mendacity and follow the credible narrative. When I asked my grandfather Leo about it, he said that when the politicians and bureaucrats of the United States are such practiced, compulsive liars, who can ever know the truth?

When I asked him about the politicians in the other countries, he just closed his eyes and took a long hit from the local harvest and whispered, "Worse than here. inbreeders. All a bunch of stinkin inbreeders."

Two of the sailors twirl their mallets in imitation of Samurai sword fighters, a skill they surely learned on past deployments to Japan. One with a new arm rolls his shirt sleeve back to reveal the artificial limb attached to a burned stub of an elbow that he has tatted with red and blue ink letters I can't make out. Their posting East to Asia had to be more than three years before, as shortly thereafter North Korea made Japan look like a Harry Truman reprise. The third sailor crushes his mallet against the lever, only to raise the puck halfway to the bell. He curses and looks at my tennis shoes and says, "Whad'ya lookin at kid? Take your blue suede sneakers outta here and let men do their job!"

"Put a dog mask on that mug of yours!" I shout back, ready to run if he comes at me. He out-weighs me by forty pounds and Party Boy's long gone. He takes his freehand and roughly pulls up the front of his shirt to reveal a fresh tattoo on his chest of a nude red-headed woman with the tatted words, *I die for you*. No weapons tucked into his belt, the security guards check those at the entrance to the fair. Only the military police walking in threes throughout the grounds are supposed to be armed.

He pulls his shirt back down and smirks at me with the words, "that's something for you to dream about, boy. Until then take your blue suede shoes and run off and

put a paper bag over that burnt out face of yours. This is a man's world." I match him by pulling down the front neck of my loose shirt to reveal my tattoo, *I Surf*.

The other boy with good arms laughs and slaps the back pockets of his trousers and comes up with empty hands stretched to his sides. He says to me in a loud voice for all the fair to hear, "I love it! I love it!" He holds out his hand and I slap it. Then he goes off, "If you're gonna die, you're gonna die; and ain't no dog mask gonna save your ass!" He looks about the mask-less people and continues, "Tell that one to those dead techno-billionaires that tried to hide in their McMansions in the Amazon rain forest when the world decided to implode!" He stands there, looking for approval, but the people just walk past, so he gives his punch line: "Tribe of pygmies darted em with poison and then fed em to the pirannah!" People ignore him. He tries one more, "Or those narcissistic-billionaires that dodged off into space and one of them got blow'd up by some space debris that Musk polluted up there and the other got blood cancer from his lithium batteries!" Tough crowd. Nobody laughs. Nobody even groans. They just walk past as he shouts, "Freaking anybody speak English round here?" That seems to be a valid question but the people ignore him and he so points at my hat. "Nice beach. You a good swimmer?"

"Qualified for the Olympic Trials that never happened."

"Too bad," he says. Then Dog Face holds the mallet out to me and gloats, "OK, Miss Olympia. This is Pearl Harbor Day. December 7. Maybe it's your lucky day?" I think about showing him up, making a go of it, and he says, "I see ya got your John Wayne dangling around your neck like dog tags. Your old man in the service?"

"Was," I reply.

"Probably a freaking Marine?" Less a question than an insult. I nod slightly. Smile widens on his face. "Show us what you got Squirt."

"Squirt?" That's a new one I'd never been called before. *Drunk Navy boy thinks I'm a guy* and thinks he can piss me off to face the challenge: maybe he's right, except this old Gypsy woman, smelling of garlic and olive oil, steps forth from her small canvas wall tent and motions to me. Her tent is a light white color and looks like something I saw in my American History class about the American Civil War. Its outside walls are marked with animal feet, scarlet lip prints, and hieroglyphics written in paint the colors of mint and blood and cobalt blue. Strewn above the tent flap entrance and draped down its sides are long, wide swaths of myriad faded-colored silk scarves: purples, greens, blues, and reds. Her invitation entices me. What the heck. Maybe she

is prescient about my non-existent love life. I shake *no* to the sailor boy—he smirks, runs his hand under his shirt over his tattoo and drinks more beer.

People still hoard garlic as a hedge against disease. I don't believe it works for the bombs: atomic or nuclear; but most of those were ripped asunder by intercepting missiles, exploding in the atmosphere, their warheads cascading to the earth with minimal immediate damage. The fallout, the radiation, took several months to affect more misery on the populous. But it's the biological creations released from drones that lift off submarines cruising off the coasts that inflict the greater part of the destruction of the species.

About two years ago, with the internet still up, there was displayed a professionally created video of a turbaned man with a long white beard who exclaimed in perfect British English, “The masses of the earth are in revolt, and now is the time for the *dis*United States and her evil partners to pay for the sins of their fathers.” Then he was gone from the World Wide Web. Never to be seen again. At least not by anyone that I knew.

That was when Washington DC ordered the nuclear aircraft carriers to depart San Diego for the east coast. The federal government showed they didn't care about us anymore—assuming they ever did anything for us but collect our taxes. The commander of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Binford, refused, eloquently stating, “we live here, our families live here, and if necessary, we die here.” The sailors tossed their hats in the air and cheered their support and broke out the intoxicants. Joint Chiefs of Staff labeled the sailors a *Band of Surfers*. Somebody in San Diego inked that on clothes, sold hundreds, and stashed her payments of booze and weed in her garage.

And DC? Within six months, when the smoke blew off the city to reveal *Nothing*, people assumed any survivor there was living in Mount Weather. The Pentagon was a giant hole. The Washington Monument was razed but somehow the Lincoln Memorial stood intact—go figure.

Inside the tent smells like fresh cut garlic and I see cloves tied in bunches and hanging from the inner walls along with tied stems of cilantro and red beets. I've never been in a gypsy tent before, so I have no expectations of the interior. The Gypsy lady has the de rigueur red flower in her shoulder length black hair that drapes over her man's tight white linen shirt. Her hips are adorned with a wide ankle length skirt of variegated patterns of red, yellow, and blue. She is bare foot in the sawdust sandy sea soil that serve as the tent floor.

She sits me down at a small table covered with a purple tablecloth and oriental light and takes my hands. We both have dark brown hands from the California sun. Hers are adorned with silver and gold rings, and a leather beaded turquoise wrist bracelet that I recognize as Navajo.

"Monument Valley?" I inquire.

"Si." Her caramel eyes glance quickly at mine.

She studies my palms and takes a long look at my posture and shoulders, and finally says, "you are a young girl, with still the flatness of a boy." I blush slightly and then she gets down to her business. She runs her fingers along my palms for many seconds, and while still looking at them, says, "You're going to live to be one hundred." I smirk at this idea. The world is going to Hades and I'm going to live to be a hundred. Who else is going to be there? I think about my eighty-year old grandfather Leo now living in Guerro Negro in Baja California. An eclectic figure with a rich history of observing the world. MIT graduate, studied medicine and law. I revel in his stories. My twin brother Frank was staying at his Ranch outside of Crescent City in Northern California when the quarantine went into effect. Now we three are separated and I wonder if we will ever see one another again, in person or through some electronic device.

Ten months ago Moscow was destroyed by something more powerful than Ukraine and Paris finally burned to the ground. We only know this from some cell phone texts with attached photos that made it through cyberspace. Are they real? If so, when did it occur? No one knows. Not even the military can verify it. The San Diego civic and military leaders, like Admiral Binford, tell us we have about a year before the fight comes to our shores, that there are still many missiles out there aimed at San Diego and its numerous military bases—they can't verify it, but state it as fact instead of rumor. They "will protect us as best they can." The troops smile glumly at that proclamation. They are the last hope for *America's Finest City*.

The Gypsy lady looks further into my palms and says, "You've been living in the eye of the storm. Soon it will overtake you." Maybe this lady is a seer, maybe she can tell me the exact date and time and manner of the missiles—as if that could help me!—and so I start to press her for more detail, but she holds a finger up to silence me. Then she runs her fingers along my palms for many seconds, glancing back and forth between my hands and face and corpus, like she can't place me with the future she sees for me. The High Striker is eerily silent, the tent feels sacrosanct, the pungent smell of garlic deepens in the air, and then I feel a drop of water on my right thumb.

Surprised, I watch the red rose tilt up with the lady's head and our eyes meet. The lady is weeping. She carefully folds up my palms and says, "Where did you come from?"

"What d'ya mean?"

"I mean, where did you come from?"

"You're the Gypsy fortuneteller, not me. You're supposed to know these things—my past, my present, to divine my future—unless you're a fraud?" These insinuations anger her so much that she accidentally knocks a small glass of olive oil off the table, where it spills out into the soil. She replaces the glass and roughly picks up my hands.

"You're right handed." I nod and the lady examines my left hand.

"You have water hands, you are very sensitive, very emotional." I nod.

"Your hands are tough, like a worker." *A sensitive worker. OK.*

I interject, "Everybody works to survive. Tell me something unique."

She takes my right hand and runs her fingers across the palm. She gently turns it over slightly and begins to run a finger along the creases and over the mounds and says, "Your sun line, Apollo's line—you will have great prominence in the future." She runs her fingers across the shapes and continues, "Your fate line—you will have strong forces, seemingly insurmountable forces that you will be able to control with your intelligence, but mostly with your intuition." She holds my right hand and picks up my left hand and folds them together and gently pushes them back to me.

"OK." *I wonder if she understands sarcasm.* "What else?"

"I see turmoil."

"Don't tell me the obvious."

"Both your parents are dead."

"That applies to ninety percent of the kids out here."

I'm getting angry. "What about me? Specifically me. Not these generalities that apply to everybody that's still alive in San Diego." The Gypsy looks at me with neither a smile nor a frown. Time is too short and I don't wanna play this game so I demand, "What d'ya see in my hands and don't tell me nothing. One hundred years of nothing!" I'm ready to stand up and walk out of there and argue with the sailor boys, when she says:

"Frank is fine in the City of the Crescent Moon."

I shut up.

She continues, "Leo is blissful with the whales and dolphins."

This lady has touched my remaining family. I stop breathing.

"And me. What about me?"

“Speeder of Ships waits on you.” My breath comes back—Speeder of Ships is a dolphin that I surfed with and how could this Gypsy lady know of her?

“But what is going to happen to me?”

“Everything—the readiness is all.”

What kind of riddle is this lady speaking? Some Gypsy jabberwocky cocky crap that I’m supposed to interpret in order to get a foggy future that can go in any direction? I don’t have the time to play her game, and so I say, “Cut the Hamlet crap. I’m prepared. I’m a Scout. Almost an Eagle Scout.”—I smile at my words—*how ludicrous that a rat is almost an Eagle Scout*—thank you Grandpa.

“Good. You need to be.” She stands up. I stand next to her. We are the same height. Maybe five inches over five feet. I’m still unsure as to whether she is for real or a charlatan. Then the seer quietly says, “The man, the man you have been thinking about.” Now she has me. She waits—she plays her pauses.

“He will be more complex, more mysterious, than all your dreams of the world.”

There is the silence of past dreams which never materialized. There is the quiet of a present that can end at any moment. Now there is a promise of a future that is beyond my comprehension.

She knew all along why I chose to walk into the tent. Or am I giving myself too much credit in intimating of free will? Didn’t the Gypsy call me over. Did I really have a choice to meet with this lady? She moves against me for a good hug. Then we break and the lady quickly nods in the direction of the tent flap. I reach into my pocket for a four-ounce bag of wheat flour but the lady refuses payment. She ushers me to the tent flap and gently touches my elbow and whispers, “You must learn when to be still and when to act.” She gently pushes me out to the bright sun and the loud clang of a High Striker winner of a stuffed pink pig. I look up to see the rung bell and see an Osprey, silhouetted against the high black December clouds, swirling from side to side on the desert breeze, like a slow-motion slalom skier dancing affront a foreboding volcanic mountain slope.

Famished by my encounter, I ignore the tatted sailor tossing his pink pig up in the air and catching it behind his back with an intoxicated grin, and walk about a hundred yards to locate one of those *Hottest Hot Dogs of the World*. I walk past a long line of masked people going for a free booster shot and wonder what mutated virus do they expect immunity from? So many in the world, such a short time to live, why risk the side effects for their last days on earth. Whatever—their life, their choice. I glance at four big, strong looking women in their mid-twenties, obvious roid users whose tie-

dyed rainbow shirts mark them as members of the Lezbo Club. Tough bitches that you don't mess with, as one of them eyes me going past and sticks out her tongue between her middle and forefinger and grins.

I ignore her and use some flecked gold to buy a super jumbo dog stuffed into a fresh baked bun coated with sesame seed—the dog smeared with onions, relish, mustard, peppers—and when I tilt my head back to stuff it into my mouth, I see the bird above me. That dog was truly hot and I wash it down with some lemonade. I finish that dog and order up a second one and a second lemonade. The Osprey is still looking at me when I do my second tilt to put that second dog down. I close my eyes to savor the heat on my lips and tongue as it slips down my throat. When I open up, the Osprey is hovering directly above me.

Intrigued, to test if it is a coincidence, I saunter with my lemonade from the 4H Club chicken exhibition to the penny arcade with all the simulated weapons. I stop there for fifteen minutes to win a trophy with some expert shooting of a rifle in accordance with my late father's teachings. Then I carry my stuffed clownfish prize, I name him Leaf, past the cotton candy stalls and over to the side show tents where the bearded women and dwarfs and freaks are basking in the sunless afternoon. We exchange pleasantries about my shoes, their distinctions, and my look. They ask when I will begin to shave! I laugh out loud and they join my mirth. Good people.

The Tallest Man in the World, maybe seven and a half feet, sees the John Wayne around my neck and asks, “Our electric can opener broke. Can you open a couple of our cans with that P-38?”

“Sure.” They line up several short vegetable cans and tall pineapple drink cans and I quickly open them.

“Thanks,” says the youngest person of the troupe, a child of maybe five or six with no arms, just stumps above his elbows. His skin is perfectly smooth, no visible trauma, so he must have been born that way. Mother was probably radiated in the early stages of pregnancy by some terrorist act.

“You're welcome.” I wave good-bye.

Ten months earlier Boston and quickly Chicago turned into swarms of people and cars and anarchy as the inhabitants tried to flee; to where? Most of the satellites hosting the internet and world communications had been destroyed, but there were videos of their *death grappling* on the flickering internet. There was no trace of the armies. Where had they gone? Rumors flew that the individual soldiers had left for their homes and families: wherever that might be. But no state national guards, no



organized police agencies, no nothing! Then Rio de Janeiro disappeared. When the internet came up for half an hour, satellite images showed rubble all about with no signs of life. It looked like Gaza or Bakhmut at ground zero.

I walk toward another corner of the fair where I know the mutant cages are. My Osprey seems agitated now, as he makes short diving motions toward me before pulling back to resume floating in the sky. There are three steel cages, each one maybe two hundred feet square and ten foot high, standing close together. Each one has a small porta-potty in it, tethered by chain to a steel cage corner so the mutants can't rip it apart and start throwing shit all over the place. There are about ten soldiers, look like Marines, sitting around and playing cards beside the cages. There is a small crowd looking at the mutants. One cage is empty, another has three creatures sleeping under old military blankets placed on dried hay. Most of the people are standing back from the middle cage and gawking at what appears to be a previously beautiful black woman, probably thirty years of age, with a wildness about her. Probably six feet three, head erect with a magnificent stature, scraggly silver hair that reveals little horned ears that stick up in the air like a coyote dog on alert. Her eyes are ink black and half closed and she prowls within her cage with a mixture of pride in herself and disdain at the people on the outside. She has the dormant body of a long snake draped around her neck and falling across her bare breasts. The snake's blackness merges into the color of her skin, and the snake is only discernible by several thin yellow stripes that run along its body. She wears a torn brown shirt that pulls her giant mammaries together in a cleavage as deep as the Grand Canyon. The lady's long arms are covered by the sleeves of the shirt, which appears to be made from the torso of a woman, as the back of the shirt has two nipples on it. Bracelets of gold and silver adorn her wrists and ankles. Her legs are covered in worn leather leggings and I see the back thigh of her right leg exposed through a giant tear, revealing a wide and deep purple scar that was closed up by cauterization. At the foot of her cage, scribbled on a rectangular piece of plywood are the words:

**The Temptress - caught in Costa Rica February of this year.**

When the lady turns away from the crowd they slip closer and scream and shout and throw unshelled peanuts at her. She turns back and throws herself against the bars, snake body and naked breasts sticking between the small vertical openings. She opens her mouth and showers venom at them from her yellowish sharp teeth, reminiscent of a vampire, causing the people to run back screaming. I watch this game play out several times with the same crowd: laughing, drinking their beers, eating and

throwing their peanuts, until there is a high-pitched short scream. The crowd splits apart and I see a middle-aged woman in a Hawaiian muumuu lying on the ground. Trampled by about twenty people reminiscent of rock concert stampedes of long ago.

“Is there a doctor in the house?” wails the voice of an elderly gentleman who hobbles over to her and kneels down to hold her wrist. No one responds so one of the Marines, a muscular fellow in his early twenties, joins the man:

“Medic!” Nothing.

“Anyone?”

A wide black man, maybe six feet two in height, three feet wide in the shoulders, pushes through the gawkers. A blond-haired woman in a white medical coat trails close behind him. The blonde moves through the people and touches the Marine on his shoulder. She is as tall as him, maybe six feet, and I know he enjoys her touch.

“Are you a medic?” he asks.

“Doctor,” she replies. I note her touch and beauty momentarily confuse him and so he points down to the ground. She asks: “Did the crowd surge over her?” The Marine nods.

She kneels down to the prone lady. I note the initials D.V.M on her smock and figure she’s a veterinarian. Whatever. We’re all animals now and Darwin is checking his charts to verify who is the fittest and what qualities, besides dumb luck, do they possess? The doctor checks the lady’s body. I watch the freaking black woman watching them with a fanged smirk. Even in a cage she can create havoc. I fear what she could muster if she were free and then I see the look of one of the Marines, one with a shaved head, toward the proud woman. Not a look of fear, but wonder, intrigue. A sensualist not afraid of shortening his life for an extreme copulation.

One of the Marines, a black man with Staff Sergeant stripes, says, “Donny, don’t you be looking at that colored lady like that.”

Donny catches himself and says, “What’s that Serge?”

“She be too much for me Donny; so a white boy like you wouldn’t last five minutes with her.” Two of the other Marines laugh with the Sergeant but Donny doesn’t flush with embarrassment or anger—he just turns his look back toward the Costa Rican. Then I sense a current of electricity and I look to the mutant and we lock eyes for several seconds before I turn away from an incipient grin. I see a group of five men, not present military, but dressed in the military trappings that indicate they served in the past. They’ve been watching the turmoil with smiles on their faces. Bad Boys from their east county camp. Weapons checked at the front entrance,

except for their fists and martial arts training. Looking for action anywhere they can find it in their quest for power.

The wide shouldered black man walks over to the cage of the Costa Rican woman. They stare at one another and suddenly she reaches a hand through the bars and scratches it across his face. He slaps her hand away, says nothing, turns back and walks over to the blonde doctor. He walks right past me and I'm amazed there is no mark on his face: no laceration, no skin discoloration, no blood lines, no coagulated blood. No nothing.

Two other Marines bring out a stretcher, put the lady on it and carry her away. The old man shuffles beside her, cooing soothing sounds from an ancient love ritual. The doctor and her black companion go with them. The black man's shoulders taper down to his hips in a V formation. *Maybe they call him BV*. I watch them leave and tilt my lemonade cup back to take the last sip and I see a black drone up in the sky. Who does that belong to? Who's watching this? More security? Higher above is my Osprey, who suddenly drops straight down like an Eagle and collars the drone and flies off to a cry from the cages. I look over to see the proud woman screaming indecipherable words which push the crowd back and take the remaining Marines off their card game as they grab their rifles and scatter everyone, me included. I don't want to ask them what happened to the woman to make her that way. They aren't scientists who postulate theories of BS of what afflicts. They're just hard drinking Marines ready to sacrifice themselves for what is left of their country. I leave and the bird reappears above me with no trace of the drone.

Everywhere I go, he follows high in the sky, still agitated. I name my Osprey, Hermes, a nod to the God or gods that keep making significant appearances in my family's lives. There isn't much else to do at the fair, so I go back to take on the sailor boys. I take a short cut behind the tents with nobody around and suddenly Hermes crashes down on my clownfish with tearing talons.

"Whaaaat!" –as Leaf drops at my feet and Hermes climbs in the sky. I pick up my fish and check out the torn material and touch a small plastic object visible on his insides. It's a chip. I saw one identical to this last summer in a military surplus store when I accidentally walked into the restricted area. I overheard a man explaining its use as a tracker and audio transmitter before they kicked me out. Was this meant for me? Did they let me win the clownfish? I'm getting paranoid. I drop it, destroy it with the heels of my blue suede tennis shoes, give a wave of thanks to Hermes, and take my slashed clownfish gently in hand. One of his fins looks like his name: a torn Leaf.

Maybe the Gypsy has a needle and thread to sew Leaf up. Maybe I can beat the little sailor boy for his stuffed pink pig and have two trophies? Maybe his pink pig has the same type of tracker in it?

I walk down a sandy path past the carousel of wooden horses packed with small urchins and several adults. Beyond them is the three-hundred-foot-high Ferris Wheel with open cars for the riders. There is a long line of all ages and looks of people waiting to be thrilled. Then I back track past the people and packed stalls toward the High Striker to challenge the sailor boys to a throw down. When I arrive they're gone—but the bitter smell of beer puke lingers along the ground. They've been replaced by some drunken teen-age boys and girls—little older than me. Valley types with the La Coste clothes that probably hang by the score in their parents' McMansions. Probably been drinking since they turned thirteen, trying to pretend the wars don't exist. They clumsily swing their mallets under the shadows thrown out by a large set of electric lights behind the carnival tents. They do it with less inebriation and less skill than the sailor boys.

I move past them and around the High Striker to see if the Gypsy woman has a needle and thread. She claims to predict the future; can she work with the present? Her tent is gone. The sawdust that served as the tent floor is unswept. The smell of garlic permeates the sandy soil. I look closely at the ground and see the imprints of my tennis shoes: where I walked through the tent flap, where I moved over to the table, and where I sat down with her chair. I see the table leg and chair dings in the soil. I see my tennis shoe imprints where the Gypsy stood with me and where I walked back out the tent when I left her. But I don't see the prints of the Gypsy's bare feet. I kneel down on the soil to find any trace, any trace I can—and I touch a small area of sawdust muddied from the spilt olive oil.

I walk over to one of the tipsy girls, a blonde beauty with a well-nourished face, who leans down to pick up the mallet that had slipped from her slack, chubby fingers. The girl's body is one of corpulence, with her love handles folding over the short dress that she wears. A dress of light pink color that stops at her bulky knees. Midriff exposed by a tight red cotton shirt tied against her half-exposed breasts to accent what little womanliness she has. Pink is not her color—it clashes with the abundant acne on her shoulders.

“What happened to the Gypsy woman?” The girl screws her face up with foggy thoughts.

“Whooo?” she asks, dragging it out like a Dr. Seuss character. I wonder how she will look better in the future as deprivation ascends.

“There was a Gypsy woman in a tent right over there about an hour ago. Didn’t you all see her?”

“Never saw her,” the obese girl mutters, leaning her hand on the mallet to display a diamond ring digging into her fleshy finger. Probably needs to show it off before she and it are destroyed by a drone or some local thief takes it from her by force.

“How long you been here?” I ask the group.

One of the boys, a quite tall specimen wearing a loose black-tie dangling from his neck in front of a Brooks Brothers’ white cotton dress shirt, speaks into his foamed beer cup. “bout that same hour. We took over from sailors that got called back to their ship.”

“Three big white boys?”

“Yeah, that’s them,” says a nondescript second boy lining up his mallet over the lever, “one of em had half an arm and we didn’t see no Gipsies (I spell that the way he pronounces it) round here.”

I point. “She was right there. Small tent with graffiti written all over it and streaks of blood crossing all over the outside.”

“Maybe she’s one of those cannibals that came down from Nevada for the fair and a chance to grab some kids,” laughs the corpulent one. I think this fat girl would be one of their meals.

“Maybe shez a witch and *poof*, just disappeared,” says Brooks Brothers Boy.

I shake my head, “I dunno. I couldn’t see any footprints where I was talking with her.”

“Probably walks on water like Jesus at Galilee,” snorts the big girl. I don’t like her. I wouldn’t eat her if she was the last piece of bacon on the planet.

“Thanks.” As I walk away with Leaf in my arm and Hermes high overhead, I hear the future meal say in a stage whisper, “Who’s that short boy with those long legs stuck into those blue suede tennis shoes?”

“That’s one of those La Jolla rat surfers.”

As I head for the exit my ears hear a bellowing hoot of a deep male voice and I look up to the distance at the turning Ferris Wheel. Too far away to be certain, but in the open car at the apex of the ride, a small break in the clouds allows a ray of sunlight to shine off the bald head of a man dressed in green Marine fatigues standing next to a woman with torpedo breasts thrust naked to the world. Whatever. I turn away,

taking my animals, stuffed and alive, past the guarded gate. I glance at the abundance of weapons that stick out from the cubicles where they were tagged when their owners were allowed entrance: Brownings, AK47s, Glocks, Smith & Wesson, Benelli, 44s, sabers, bow and quiver of arrows, machetes, knives, blackjacks and assorted home-made weaponry fill the boxes. I find my bike, unlock it and ride toward the coast where I know the tide to be low, exposing a wide sandy beach for me to ride south to La Jolla.

Riding across the dry white sand toward the shoreline, I see a small navy gray skiff flying in the air over the waves as it starts its journey back to the aircraft carrier. It's filled with sailors and certainly the stuffed Pink Pig—not the fat girl, but the real trophy.

Biking at sea level, Hermes gliding above me, I see two small urchins running in and out of the shallow water, screaming unintelligible utterances. I reach them and they grab at me, crying, "Mister! You gotta save em. Please! Mister! Save him!"

I look out to the surf, but see only a swift riptide running parallel to the beach, then joining a wide surge that flows out to sea. It's hard to concentrate with the girls pleading and pawing at me when suddenly I see two small dark feet pushing out of the water, followed by the bobbing head of a small black dog.

"Hermes!" I shout and immediately the Osprey soars over the puppy, plunges toward it, then flaps back into the sky as it circles the spluttering dog. I drop my bike, Leaf, hat, trousers, and blue suede tennis shoes, and rush into the outgoing riptide which quickly takes me out to sea. It's impossible to see the dog with the waves and kelp and undulating water surface created by the sandbar bottom, so I follow the guidance of Hermes. I'm parallel to the bird and take several vigorous strokes with my arms to break free of the rip and reach the black puppy with the terrorized eyes. I swim behind the dog and grab it from behind with an arm under its belly, reaching between its front legs to firmly grab the dog's small chest. The dog squirms as I pull it against my torso. I kick my legs and use my free arm to stabilize us. The dog makes no sounds. A small wave breaks over us, giving us a small push toward the beach before leaving us behind. I roll onto my back, cradle the pup beside me, and kick from my hips through toes in the direction of the sand. I'm a strong swimmer and the puppy realizes this and relaxes against me. We are comfortable in the water and he begins to lick my face and I start to giggle as we work our way toward shore. I follow Hermes glide in the sky above while the puppy's body is on my chest and he can see

the shoreline ahead and he barks several times. We're getting close to shore as I hear the screaming of the kids.

"Yeaaaaah!"

Their high-pitched cries increase in volume and then I let go of the dog and flip over and stand on the sand, chest high. I grasp the dog and say, "You need the practice. Swim in from here while I walk next to you." I push the puppy toward the shore and walk along its side as we make it to the sand and the waiting children who smother it in their lifting arms.

"Thank you so much sir," exclaims one of the girls, her arms entangled with the other girl's and wrapped in an embrace with the puppy between them. Their tears of joy mingle with the dog's wet coat.

"You're welcome." I shake my arms and then legs to dry a little before putting on my clothes to continue my ride. The kids put the puppy down and it imitates me by shaking out its coat.

"Your dog seems fine but you might wanna have a Vet check him out. I saw one over at the fair earlier." They nod.

I put on my trousers; then sit on the sand to put on my blue suede tennis shoes. The black dog bumps up against me and licks my face and hands and everywhere else that it can—even a couple of tongue caresses for my Leaf. When my shoes are on, I grab the puppy, give him a reciprocated big hug, exchanging smothering kisses, and end by grasping the dog's cheeks in both of my hands and looking it directly in the eyes. "You take care of yourself, you hear? I'm gonna be around for at least another eighty-four years and I wanna see you again someday. OK?" We look at one another for about a minute, our beings subliminally connecting, and then I stand up and say, "You all look out after one another and maybe I'll see you around." The girls hug me while the dog stands back and seems to study me. We break away and I ask, "What kind of dog is he?"

"Volkodav."

"What country?"

"Turkmenistan."

I give the three a thumbs up, get back on my bike, wave at one another, and ride off; the dog running with me. After fifty yards I stop. "You go back now—you hear?" The dog hears. One more stroking his face, one more mutual kiss, and he follows my arm direction to return to the girls, who wave