

The Devil's Grip

by Casey Robb

Rusty Serrano woke with a jerk, sweating, writhing, gasping for breath. Again, that damn dream—a baby squeezed in a vise, in a grip, too smothered to scream. He steadied his breathing. The first morning rays of West Texas summer sun flooded the room, casting flickers of lilac and crimson through the crystals on his dresser, blue calcite and rosy quartz.

Last night, he'd heard his mom's keys jangling as she came in late from her job at the café. He knew she would sleep in. His older brother Tate would be up any minute for his job at the car shop. Rusty, 19 and out of school, had no job, nowhere to go. At least not today. But he had a plan.

He pulled out the bottom dresser drawer and fingered the papers he'd brought back from Alpine and hidden under his jeans. He hadn't told anyone. Not his mom. Not even Tate. Especially not Tate.

He listened for dishes clinking in the kitchen. Silence. *Good, no one's up.*

Rusty had cerebral palsy. One of those baby birthing things. Couldn't get out. He never got why. Was he not allowed to be born or something? His legs jerked this way and that, but his hands were steady and his mind was sharp. And another blessing – his good looks, with his black hair, blue eyes and lean physique.

Rusty pulled on his jeans, hoisted himself off the bed, and walked down the hall to the kitchen on two legs that carried him like clumsy stilts, his arms sweeping the air for balance—*like swimming... or drowning.*

He opened the back door. The desert heat rolled in. He caught a glimpse of the lazy semi-rural roads of Marathon, his small, stifling town. *Aptly named, too. Marathon—my life!*

He glanced down the hall, grabbed one of his mom's Coors from the fridge, and

downed half of it. “C-Can’t let T-Taaaate see this.” His CP put a twist to his tongue, to his lips, pulling out his words like Silly Putty. “M-Mr. Perfect T-Taaate.”

Tate, with his dark brown hair and eyes, his easy smile, looked just like their dad. Or so he’d heard. He only knew the man from photos and stories—stories of his dad’s drinking, his lost jobs, his fights.

Then baby Rusty’s diagnosis had arrived—cerebral palsy. *That must have been the last straw for the coward*, Rusty often thought. *He up and ran, like a chicken gizzard. Not even a trickle of kid support from the bastard—not from the bank and not from the heart.*

Rusty chugged the last half of the cold beer. He heard footsteps. Too late.

“Rusty!” Tate yelled. “What the hell are you doing? Put that beer down.”

“N-Not your b-buuusiness!”

“That’s Mom’s beer.”

“Sh-Sheee said I could have soome.”

“It’s mine too. I pay the bills, don’t I?” Tate was a mechanic now, helping his mom who could barely cover the rent. “And I say you can’t have it.”

“W-Waaatch me,” Rusty said, and chugged two more gulps.

“At breakfast? Geez! What a lush. How are you ever gonna get a job?”

“I-I’ll get a job. You just waaatch. I’ll do better. I’ll get a careeeer.”

“A career? Are you nuts? You barely finished high school.”

“Y-Yeah, but—”

“But nothing. Put the beer down and go back to bed, you stupid drunk.”

The beer can went flying and hit Tate on the side of the face. Tate lunged at Rusty and wrestled him to the kitchen floor. Rusty grabbed at Tate’s leg and Tate shook him off. “You brainless baby!” Tate cried. “Mama’s boy!”

Rusty lay on the floor cradling a bruised elbow as Tate headed for the door. “Forget

breakfast,” Tate said. “I’m going to work. And don’t expect me at dinner. I’ll be at Sissy’s.”

Tate always had his arm around some girl, though lately it had just been Sissy. Tate slammed the door behind him, revved up his motorcycle and took off.

Rusty pulled himself up on a kitchen chair, balanced on his legs and shook his fist. “B-Bastard,” he blurted. “I’m g-going tonight. To the desert. N-Not j-juuust to the d-desert. T-To the cave! And you’re c-coming too, T-Taaate.”

That evening, Rusty drove his pickup to Sissy’s apartment hoping to surprise them. The wheels were a gift from Mom. And Tate had rigged the truck at the shop with a steering knob and a joystick hand pedal: push to go, pull to stop. Rusty’s legs were useless for driving, but his hands were deft. He veered the truck into the parking space by Sissy’s door and, jerking the joystick forward, screeched the brakes a little just for fun.

“Uh, oh.” He noticed empty beer cans on the floor and tossed them behind the seat out of sight. He slid out of his truck and felt the folded paper in his back jeans pocket, then knocked. Sissy opened the door.

“Hey, Rusty. What’s up?” She stood smiling at him. *Stunning*, Rusty thought. He couldn’t help but stare at her tousled dark blonde hair, laughing blue eyes, and curves in all the right places.

Sweet. Like Sandra, in Alpine yesterday. In the library, he’d sat at a table across from two girls who were moving their hands in a rapid rhythm like a salsa dance, like a rumba. They’d glanced at him and giggled. One girl flipped back her brown hair and, with her finger, drew a circle around her face, slid her palms together and pointed at him. Rusty shrugged and shook his head. She pulled a pencil and paper from her purse, wrote a note, and pushed the

paper to him. It said, *'face nice = handsome. Wow!'* Below that, she'd written, *'Sandra.'* He looked up and she pointed to herself. She reached across the table and patted his hand. Her touch felt silky, like a cool desert breeze in the heat of the day. Glancing at her watch, she gave him a wink, waved bye to her friend and left. No one had ever called him handsome before. Certainly not in sign language.

Sweet, he thought again, still staring at Sissy who stood leaning in the doorway. He broke his gaze and glanced away. The TV blared from the living room. Sissy called behind her, "Tate, it's your brother."

Tate shouted from the couch over the TV noise, "What the...?" Before Tate could get off the couch, Rusty leaned toward Sissy, close enough to inhale her scent, like a blue sage blossom. He whispered, "H-Hey, S-Sissy. You wanna g-go to a c-cave?"

"What do you mean? A real cave?" she asked. "Awesome. When?"

"L-Like, n-now." Rusty's voice felt tight, trying to sound casual.

Tate joined her at the door. "A cave? You got to be kidding. We have to work tomorrow."

"Oh, please, honey," Sissy whined, her lips in a pout. "It's early."

"At night?" Tate shot Rusty a glare.

"Come on, baby," she murmured, stroking Tate's cheek. "Out there under the stars." She leaned to him and whispered, "My caveman." Tate rolled his eyes.

They squeezed into the front seat of Rusty's truck and headed south on a remote desert highway, in silence, for miles. The sun hung low in the west. Tate grasped the window ledge and wrapped his left arm around Sissy who sat wedged in the middle. Rusty watched in the mirror as she smirked, then kissed and nibbled on Tate's ear, whispered to him with that

voice like molasses, and murmured, “My caveman,” as if Rusty wasn’t there, as if he didn’t have feelings like other guys.

Tate just stared ahead, didn’t even answer Sissy. *He didn’t have to*, Rusty thought. *Tate’s cool, the ladies’ man. Tate answers to no one.*

Finally, Rusty veered off the road and jounced his pickup down a dry sandy *arroyo* and into the creosote flats as the summer sun disappeared behind the crusty peaks of the Santiago Mountains. Dusty pinks and blues emerged along the jagged eastern horizon. Rusty spotted the distant high mesa with its sloping red ridge. He swerved the truck around a cluster of prickly pear cactus and slowed, then flicked on the headlights and weaved a path among the mesquite trees and the spiky cholla. Rusty dodged a rocky outcrop, and jerked on the joystick to pick up speed.

“Jesus, Rusty!” Tate shouted. “I didn’t rig this truck for you to get us killed. Use that stick slow and easy!” Rusty felt his face flush. “What’s gotten into you lately?” Tate persisted. “Just ’cause you got your own wheels now, thanks to Mom. Must be Easy Street being the baby of the family,” Tate went on.

“I’m n-not the b-baaaby,” Rusty said.

“Well, you act like it. If she only knew how you drove. Man, the stuff you get away with!”

Rusty stared out at the jagged landscape, his jaw clenched. He gripped the wheel and veered around a big barrel cactus. On every bounce, Sissy’s thigh rubbed against Rusty’s leg, but neither she nor Tate seemed to notice. Rusty glanced at the rearview mirror at Sissy’s blue eyes, at the purple cloisonné barrette that barely hung on to her flaxen hair fluttering in the dusty wind.

Near the high mesa, he headed for a rocky butte, wrenched the brake and skidded to a stop by a lone juniper a few yards from a rocky outcrop. Tate held onto the window. Sissy’s

hands flew out to brace herself on the dash. She let go a stifled screech, and laughed.

“Where are we?” Sissy wrapped her arms around Tate.

“At Rusty’s favorite hangout, the middle of nowhere.” Tate gestured out to the sandy basin. “I don’t care how cool the cave is, desert is boring.”

“N-no, it’s not b-boring.” Rusty reached into his back jeans pocket and fingered the folded paper. *Good, it’s still there.* “Look.” He pulled a piece of violet amethyst crystal from the side pocket of his blue jean jacket and handed it carefully to Sissy. She rolled it in her hands and offered it to Tate, who looked away.

“Besides, you could get hurt out here.” Tate brushed the dust off his jacket. “The wilds of West Texas is no place for a kid with crippled legs. It’s just you and the buzzards. And for what? A bunch of stupid rocks? Jesus!”

“Y-You caaan’t tell me whaaat to do.” Rusty’s throat tightened.

“Like hell I can’t. Somebody needs to.”

Rusty didn’t answer, just glared at Tate. He stepped down from the truck, grabbed a flashlight from behind the seat, hung it on his belt, and walked around the rocky butte with that spastic, jerky gait he hated, his arms flying in a snappy motion for balance.

Tate and Sissy got out and followed him, the volcanic cobbles crunching underfoot. A bloody glow had settled on the land. At the base of the butte, almost invisible behind the spiky leaves of a towering yucca, an earthy hole gaped like a small, private wound.

“Oh, my God.” Sissy groaned.

“That’s no cave,” Tate said, standing back. “That’s a rat hole!”

Rusty tossed the flashlight into the hole, gathered his legs, slid them in, and pushed till the rock felt like fingers closing on his waist. He felt the sweat break out as he shoved himself deeper inside, until he was sitting in a small granite room the size of his bedroom. The ceiling hung low, within reach. The cold musty scent of damp soil penetrated his lungs.

Rusty flicked on the flashlight. Tate, then Sissy, squeezed through the entrance and scooted over to join him. The rough granite walls glistened with black and gold. He darted the light beam around. Shadows rose and lunged along the walls.

“Wow!” Sissy squealed. “A real cave.” She touched the ceiling. “I can’t believe it.”

“This is the Devil’s Porch,” Rusty announced. “Found it m-myself. B-But wait till you see the D-Devil’s Grip.” Rusty shined the flashlight under his chin, making a ghoulish face.

“Give me that.” Tate took the flashlight and peered around. “You’ve been down here alone? You could’ve gotten stuck. For days. Killed! For a bunch of rocks!”

“No. N-Not rocks—rhyolite, mica, limestone. L-Look.” Rusty placed his palm on the wall. “T-Touch it.” He took Sissy’s hand and set it on the dark rock. “That’s g-granite. Igneous rock. R-Rough. L-Like a man’s b-beard in the morning. H-Here.” Rusty guided Sissy’s hand to his chin and moved her fingers gently across his thick, black stubble. She allowed the touch for a moment, and withdrew her hand.

“It’s *what*-neous rock?” Sissy ran her finger tips along the wall.

“Igneous r-rock, from *ignite*—f-formed by fire.”

Sissy smiled at him in the dim light. “How come you know so much about caves and rocks and stuff?”

Rusty grinned. “C-Cause they’re so cool. B-Besides, I have a s-secret.” He shifted his body toward her. “Y-You’ll be the first to hear, you and T-Taate. I haven’t even told M-Mom, or anyone.”

“So, what is it?” Tate asked impatiently. “You found another crystal?”

“No.” Rusty took a deep breath. He leaned toward Sissy and paused for effect. “I want to b-be a geologist.”

“A geologist!” Tate shouted. “Oh, come on! You barely squeaked by in high school!”

“And why n-not?” Rusty yelled.

“Because you’re not a college egghead. That’s why not.”

“They g-got claaaasses in Alpine,” Rusty said. Then he looked away and mumbled, “and g-girls...”

“Girls? What do you mean, girls?”

“I m-met one at the college. In Alpine. S-Sandra.”

“Oh, my God. Now it’s girls? What will you come up with next?”

Sissy broke in. “Aw, Tate, come on. That’s sweet. He can have a girlfriend if he wants.”

“This is outrageous!” Tate waved Sissy aside. “You don’t know him.”

“Just b-because you didn’t get into c-college!” Rusty burst out.

“Tate... You applied for college?” Sissy stared at Tate. “You never told me that.”

“So? It was stupid. Thought I wanted to be an engineer. You know, design stuff.”

Tate turned his head away in the shadows.

“No, no, no. Not stupid!” Sissy insisted. “So what happened?”

Tate shrugged. “Sul Ross. In Alpine. Got on the waiting list. ‘*Pre-engineering*,’ they called it.” He clenched his fist. “But couldn’t wait. Had to start mechanic’s school. Mom lost her job and we couldn’t make the rent. So I withdrew my application.”

Sissy shook her head. “Well, she’s working now. Maybe there’s still a way.”

“Naw...” Tate hesitated. “Besides, I’m not a college egghead either.” Tate turned to Rusty and glared at him, clenching his jaw. “But if I can’t get in, you sure as *hell* can’t!”

“Oh yeah? W-Well, what’s this?” Rusty yanked the folded paper from his back pocket, snapped it open, and threw it at Tate. “An application. And I’ve still got t-two days to g-get it in.” He felt glad of the dark, which concealed his shaking hands.

“Besides, college costs money, if you didn’t know. Lots of it.”

“They g-got scholarships. And l-loans. And work study j-jobs.”

“Work *and* study? Ridiculous! Then go ahead,” Tate said, his voice tense. “Fall on your face.”

“Tate, honey,” Sissy broke in. “Why couldn’t he just—”

“Don’t coddle him, Sissy. He’ll get his hopes up for nothing. Like that stock boy job. After that fell apart, he moped for months. Don’t let him fool you, Sissy. He’s a dreamer.”

“Yeah, but... dreams are...” Sissy began.

“Look, he doesn’t have to worry. Mom and I can take care of him. We always have and we always will.” Turning to Rusty, he added, “Okay, here’s my offer. I’ll see if they can use you at the shop. You know, errands, or something. Office work. Filing maybe. That will keep you busy and away from your pipe dreams.”

“Tate, hon,” Sissy added, “Can’t he study too? He’s sharp as a...”

“Sissy, you stay out of this! It’s not your business!”

Sissy rolled her eyes and crawled off with the flashlight.

“Y-You think I’m n-no good for nothing, d-don’t you?” Rusty demanded.

“Of course you’re not no good. But be realistic.” Tate shook his head. “Girls... Jeez. What do you have to offer a girl?”

“Y-You go to h-hell!” Rusty and Tate glared at each other in the dim light.

“Hey!” Sissy’s voice came from the far end of the cave. “What’s that?” Sissy aimed the light at a small hole. “It looks like a tunnel.”

“I t-told you,” Rusty said. “It’s a whole ’nother r-room. But there’s n-no way you can g-get through there.” He pointed to the hole and cleared his throat loudly. “*That* is the Devil’s Grip.”

“Oh, cool.” Sissy stuck her head into the hole and looked down the tunnel. “Oooh, you think there’s skeletons in there? You know, like old miners and stuff? Bones and picks, and... whoa... maybe gold?”

“Of course not,” Tate said.

“Let’s see.” Sissy tossed the flashlight down the shaft and pushed her shoulders through, squirming and pulling, till she disappeared into the Devil’s Grip. “Hey, I’m in.” Her muffled voice echoed up the tunnel. “It’s creepy in here, like a dungeon.”

“Damn you, Sissy! Hold on!” Tate followed her into the hole, cramming his shoulders in, then sliding and twisting till he, too, vanished into the hole.

Rusty began to sweat thinking of Tate and Sissy being squeezed, being gripped in a vise. Whisperings, like *‘my caveman’* seemed to float from the tunnel, like mumblings from the underworld.

After a while, scrapes and groans echoed up, and Tate emerged from the dungeon, inch by inch. Sissy pulled herself through the hole, sat up and tucked in her shirt.

Tate crawled to the exit. “We’re out of here.”

“Hey, wait,” Sissy said, pulling her hair back. “Where’s my barrette? My purple barrette. Damn!” She felt around on the ground. “It must be in the dungeon.”

“Can’t go back now,” Tate said. He crawled out of the cave. “Let’s go.”

“But dang. It’s special.” Sissy scrambled out of the cave. Rusty crawled out close behind her. They followed Tate to the truck, the gravel crunching under their feet. “My best friend gave it to me,” Sissy whined.

“Your BFF?” Tate teased. “Man. It’s just a barrette.”

Rusty slid into the driver’s seat and tossed his flashlight on the floor. Tate opened the passenger door wide.

Sissy scooted onto the seat on her knees, and got a glimpse of the empty beer cans piled behind the seat. “Whoa!” She turned quickly to Tate, and crooned, “Tate, sugar, can you see if my purse is back in the truck bed?”

Tate stepped away. Sissy grabbed a handful of Rusty’s shirt and pulled him close.

Rusty gasped in surprise. “Rusty, hon,” she whispered. “I see those beer cans. A whole pile of ’em. Sweetheart, that ain’t gonna get you nothing. What about your caves and your crystals? What about your mom? And Sandra? And all the other Sandras out there waitin’ for ya?” Rusty’s face flushed.

Tate appeared at the door. Sissy and Rusty sat up swiftly and faced the windshield. Tate slid into the passenger seat next to her. “Didn’t see any purse.”

“Whoops... found it.” Sissy grinned, holding up her handbag. “Now, Tate hon, how are you gonna get me another cloisonné barrette? My friend bought it in China.”

“I’ll get you one somewhere.” Tate sounded impatient.

That’s when the idea struck Rusty like a volcanic blast.

They rode home in silence, with Sissy snuggled against Tate, and Tate staring out the window. Rusty gripped the steering knob, his head spinning. He knew now what he had to do. He would retrieve the barrette. He would go to Sissy, open his palm, and there it would be—the lovely cloisonné, its gold border glistening. And Tate had to be there. Rusty had to see his face. Surprise them both. *Be realistic*, Tate had said. Well, Rusty would show them reality, a new reality. He would go through the Devil’s Grip. He had to. Alone.

The next night, Tate was at Sissy’s, and Rusty’s mom was working late at the café. Rusty laced up his hiking boots at midnight, grabbed his flashlight and a six-pack of Coors, slid behind the steering wheel and set the beer on the floor.

Driving out to the sandy *arroyo*, he parked by the lone juniper at the outcrop, opened a beer and chugged it. He snapped opened another and downed it, controlling his breath, in and out, slowly, to calm his nerves. Then he walked to the yucca by the high butte under a

star-studded sky.

Rusty felt full to bursting. He took a piss by the yucca. And, after tossing the flashlight into the ‘rat hole,’ he slid into the cave, to the Devil’s Porch, and crawled on the gravel to the Devil’s Grip on all fours like a supplicant. The tunnel loomed before him—an extended maw—longer than he remembered, a ghastly six or eight feet. But it slanted downhill. That would help. He felt the sweat break out. His heart pulsed. A lump in his throat choked him. He thought he heard a movement, a scurrying. *What was that? he wondered. A rat? A snake? A rattler?*

He inhaled deeply till his breathing slowed. *Man, I’m thirsty. Wish I’d brought that beer.*

Grasping the flashlight, he reached both arms into the Grip, jammed in his shoulders, and pushed with his feet, forcing and squirming, sliding on pea gravel inch by inch. His shoulders emerged on the other side. He was in! He was really in!

Rusty pulled his quivering legs from the tunnel and sat up. The ‘dungeon’ was a small room with a low granite ceiling that slanted down toward him, grazing his head; the slab walls leaned in like a condemned building. He darted the light around. Shadows danced along the walls, the flakes of feldspar luminous like a shattered moon. He scanned the reddish-brown dirt floor, found the scuffed-out spot where Tate and Sissy had been, and there it was—the barrette, its gold trim gleaming in the dirt.

He wiped the barrette across his jeans, watched it flicker in the flashlight beam, and stuck the jewel in his back pocket. *Yes, Tate, this is reality. Rusty Serrano is not no good for nothin’.*

He scooted to the Devil’s Grip, eager to get out. With the flashlight tightly clenched, he reached into the tunnel with both arms, and shoved and wriggled to cram his shoulders in. But his shoulders didn’t fit. They had to fit. The tunnel was the only way out.

He tried once more, forcing his shoulders and thrusting with his spastic legs. *Damn. It's uphill now.* This time, the loose dirt and pebbles worked against him, sliding him back down. Pushing with his trembling feet, he wormed his way up, inch by inch, till he reached the worst bottleneck, his hands at the outer ridge of the tunnel.

The Devil's Grip seemed to close around his torso like a cinch. He could go no further, his arms, his legs stretched out, unable to push or pull. Twisting, he wrenched with his sweating hands but couldn't dislodge his chest. The earth had him in a vise.

The flashlight grew dim. He struggled and crammed his body till his shoulders and hips were jammed in like a plug. His throat clenched down on the rising panic. He pressed again with his feet. Then his legs convulsed. The jerky rhythms jolted his hips. They jarred his chest, his neck, shaking free the sobs that had snagged in his throat.

"H-Help me!" he yelled to no one. The spasms grew stronger. He heard screams, screams from his own throat, bouncing back at him like a hammer. He felt a hand close tightly around his middle. And he knew.

The dream... the damn dream! He felt his body buckling, writhing, gasping for air. The earth, the world, had grabbed him, like a Devil's hand, a Devil's Grip. Squeezing him. Cramming him. Binding him. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't move, he needed to scream... he needed to be let-go-of!

Breathe, keep breathing. He took a slow breath, and imagined a cinch, a binding cord wrapped around his ankles, his knees, felt it coil and twine around his hips, his waist, pinning his arms to his side. An image emerged, of walking, sleeping, talking, with this cord cramming his parts together, jamming him, pinching him, crowding him. All his life... yes, he knew it... he could hardly breathe, his whole goddamn life.

"L-Let me go!" he screamed, his breaths coming quick and shallow. His shouts echoed back to him. Sweat poured down his neck, sticky like blood. He pushed and pushed.

His legs jerked and quivered, jostling him loose. His body slid down till his feet hit the dungeon floor. “Oh, G-God...” His spasms triggered, shaking his thighs in a terrible rhythm. “N-No,” he sobbed. “L-Let go!”

The flashlight went completely dark. Rusty shivered. He licked his grimy lips, felt the grit in his teeth. The cave smelled of blackness, of death. So, the Grip had won. Tate had won. The world had won. He would never get out. This was reality. He was helpless, his legs, his arms writhing out of control. The dream was true.

“No!” he screamed. Sucking air into his frantic lungs, he heaved and shoved. But the Grip, the cinch, closed on his middle like a devil. Sweat poured from his arms, his chest. His breath came in gasps. He slid forward and reached till his whole hand grasped the entrance to the tunnel. He felt another squeeze of the vise.

“I’m n-not no good for n-nothing!” His words came crashing back, echoes from the deep. “I’m a m-man!” The words pounded his chest, his shoulders, pushing him, lifting him. Closing his eyes, he inhaled a long breath and eased into the hole slowly, smoothly, squeezing himself thin. His body slid forward an inch, and another. He tugged and crept his way till his fingertips felt the far edge of the shaft. “L-Let me g-go!” he screamed. “I’m a m-maaan!”

Then breathe like a man! Breathe deep! This time, Rusty opened his lungs, inhaled, and set his breath free, felt it ooze out, like the bleeding of bile, till he was empty, clear, drained. *I’m a man!* He closed his eyes and lay still for a time. A vision of home arose... his bed... his crystals. And Tate, how he’d rigging the joystick, and got up early for work every morning, his engineering dreams diminishing, year by year, like a missed train departing in the distance. Sissy with her sweet whisperings. And his mom, María, forever dragging, tired and alone. Rusty opened his eyes in the dark, feeling thinner... lighter, as if floating, limp and loose.

He reached to the edge of the tunnel entry, and wriggled and tugged. His knuckles ached. With a calmer strength, he wriggled upward, dragging with fingers, shoving with feet, his limp body scraping along the rocks. His elbows caught the edge and dragged him, prying his torso out. The granite tore at his jacket, ripping portions of shirt away, scuffing skin. Streaks of blood and sweat smeared across his chest till he was sliding out and out and free—free from the grasp, the vise, the Devil’s Grip.

Rusty lay face down on the gravel in the Devil’s Porch, the rocks rough against his chest and his cheek. He slept a long while, sucking sweet air into his lungs with the cadence and calm of a newborn.

Finally, Rusty woke and crawled from the cave. He hiked to the high mesa and up and up along a steep, rocky trail to the flat crest on top of the world. He sat on a pile of broken breccia, held his knees, and shivered with the beauty of the vast midnight sky, the rich, ragged landscape he loved, made more mysterious by a half-moon on the rise. Standing tall, he stretched his hands high and breathed deeply, taking in the scents of the desert—pungent, bittersweet. “Not boring!”

Rusty fingered the folded paper in his jeans pocket. He pulled it out, unfolded it and held it up in the moonlight. The heading across the top read *Sul Ross State University, Admissions Application*. In the dim light, he peered at the line labeled “Name” where, tomorrow, he would fill in *Mr. Rusty Serrano*.

Rusty drew from his back pocket the cloisonné barrette. He caressed the jewel, watched the purple, the gold, glisten in the half-moonlight. With the application in hand, he hiked down the rocky trail with that jerky gait he’d always hated, and smiled. *I’m not drowning*, he thought as he inhaled the crisp night air deep into his lungs. *I’m not drowning at all. I’m swimming.*

Just past dawn, Rusty turned into a recycling center and dumped his pile of empty beer cans, then headed to Sissy's. He banged on her door, the four remaining cans of the six-pack dangling in plastic rings from his left hand.

Sissy appeared in a yellow robe, tying the cloth belt around her. "Hey, what are you..." she began. Rusty pushed past her and walked to the kitchen table with Sissy following. Tate stood at the counter stirring coffee, dressed in jeans and T-shirt.

Rusty slammed the four beers down on the table. "I d-don't n-need these anymore," he said. "I'm d-done."

Rusty pulled Sissy's cloisonné barrette from his pocket and tossed it onto the table where it bounced and clinked and glistened as it settled among the breakfast dishes. Sissy gasped. Tate stared at the barrette. And Tate looked intently at Rusty, his eyes blinking.

Rusty broke the silence. "T-Tate. You're c-coming with me."

Tate smirked. "Where the hell to now? The damn cave? The Devil's Grip?"

Rusty walked to Tate and hooked his elbow. "N-No. T-To Alpine."

Tate shook him off. "What for?"

"The d-deadline is t-today. They g-got night c-classes."

"Night classes?" Tate hurled his coffee spoon to the floor. "Goddamn you!" He chugged his brew. "Persistent bastard, aren't you?"

Tate grabbed his wallet from the table and stomped out the door. Rusty followed behind, flailing with his jerky gait. Sissy stood in the doorway, the corners of her mouth tilting toward a grin. Tate turned to her. "Call work, hon. Tell 'em I'll be late!" And he slid onto the passenger seat and stared straight ahead, his jaw clenching, as Rusty slipped behind the wheel. Tate muttered, "I'm just going for the ride. To help you out."

Rusty fired the ignition. On the dashboard sat a chunk of quartz, a crystal of lilac and rose. Rusty peered past Tate at Sissy standing at the door. She gave him a nod and a wink.

Rusty yanked the car in reverse and sped down Avenue D toward the highway.

“Jesus, Rusty!” Tate hollered. “Use that stick slow and easy! You’re gonna get us killed.”

Rusty laughed out loud.

“What?” Tate demanded. He glanced over at Rusty, then snickered... chuckled... and burst out laughing, till he was doubled over, snorting spit. Finally, he sat up straight and managed an audible sigh. Rubbing his jaw, he opened his mouth wide and relaxed his face. “You really think I can do this, huh?”

Rusty swerved the truck onto the highway. “You idiot!” he answered, smiling. He rolled down his window, letting in a rush of hot wild wind. “W-What d-do you think?”

Along the western horizon, the morning rays of Texas sun were flooding the jagged landscape with dusty greens and golds. The old truck shuddered and shook. The crystal shimmered on the dash, casting shards of rosy light around the cab. Tate lifted his hands to the sparkles and watched them quiver and quake across his palms, as Rusty jerked forward on the joystick and gunned it for Alpine.