

CASEY ROBB

The Devil's Grip

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 were flooding 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, nineteen 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, where he'd hidden the papers he'd brought back from Alpine, the college town nearby. *Sul Ross State University. So close, yet so far... until now.* He hadn't told anyone his secret plans. Not his mom. Not even Tate. Especially not Tate, who treated him like a burden, at best.

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

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

Rusty yanked 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 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 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 his dad from photos and stories—stories about 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. *The chicken up and ran. Not even a trickle of kid support from the bastard—not from the bank and not from the heart.*

Rusty took a few more swigs. He heard footsteps.

"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 soomee."

"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 the last half of the cold beer.

"At breakfast? Geez! What a lush. How are you ever going to get a job?"

"I-I'll get a job. You waaatch. I'll do better. I'll get a *careeeer*."

"A career? You barely finished high school."

"Y-Yeah, but—"

"But nothing, 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 muttered. “Mama’s boy.”

Rusty lay on the floor cradling a bruised elbow. 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 and headed for his motorcycle.

Rusty wrenched himself up on a kitchen chair, balanced on his legs, and shook his fist. “B-Bastard!” he yelled. “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 donned his blue jean jacket and drove his pickup to Sissy’s *casita*, her little white cottage with blue trim, hoping to surprise them. Tate had rigged Rusty’s used pickup 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 vehicle onto the circular drive to her porch, his tires crunching the dusty gravel, and shoved the joystick forward, screeching the brakes a little just for fun.

“Uh, oh.” He noticed empty beer cans on the floor and tossed them behind the seat. Sliding down from his truck, he struggled his way up the two wooden steps, feeling the folded paper in his jeans back pocket, and knocked on the white wooden door.

“Hey, Rusty,” Sissy said, smiling from the doorway. “What’s up?”

Rusty sighed. *She’s stunning*, he thought, and stood staring 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 young women who were moving their hands in a rapid rhythm like a salsa dance, like a rumba. They’d peered at him and giggled. One flipped back her brown hair and, lifting two straight fingers, drew a circle around her face

and pointed at him. Rusty shrugged and shook his head. She retrieved a pencil from her purse, scribbled a note, and pushed the paper to him: *face nice = handsome*. Rusty blinked, incredulous. *What? Who, me?* Below that, she'd written, *Sandra*. She pointed to herself, reached across the table, and patted his hand. Her touch felt silky, like a cool desert breeze in the heat of the day. He inhaled slowly, seeking her scent. Then, glancing at her watch, she'd tossed him a wink, waved bye to her friend and left. No one had ever called him handsome. Certainly not in sign language.

Sweet, he thought again, still staring at Sissy who stood leaning in the doorway. He broke his gaze and looked away.

The TV blared from the living room. "Tate," Sissy, called over her shoulder, "it's your brother."

"What the...?" Tate shouted over the TV noise. Before he could get off the couch, Rusty leaned toward Sissy, close enough to catch her lingering fragrance, like a blue sage blossom. "H-Hey, S-Sissy," he whispered, "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 in his jeans and T-shirt. "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 cab of Rusty's pickup 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 darted a quick side-glance and saw her smirk and kiss and nibble on Tate's ear. "Tate," she whispered, her voice like molasses, "my caveman," as if Rusty weren't there, as if he didn't have feelings like other guys.

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

Finally, Rusty veered off the road, and jounced the truck down a dry sandy *arroyo* and into the creosote flats. The summer sun disappeared behind the crusty peaks of the Santiagos, casting an orange glow on the Davis Mountains to the north. Dusty pinks and blues emerged along the eastern horizon. Rusty spotted the distant high mesa and its red sloping ridge. Swerving around a cluster of prickly pear cactus, he slowed, flicked on the headlights, and weaved a path among the mesquite trees and the spiky cholla. "Whoa!" He dodged a rocky outcrop and jerked on the joystick to pick up speed.

"Jesus, Rusty!" Tate yelled. "I didn't rig this truck for you to get us killed. Use that stick nice and slow!" 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."

"I'm n-not the b-baaaby," Rusty said.

"Well, you act like it. If she only knew how you drive. Man, the stuff you get away with!"

Rusty stared 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 stole a side-glimpse at Sissy's blue eyes and the purple cloisonné barrette that hung onto her flaxen hair fluttering in the dusty wind.

Near the high mesa, he headed for a rocky butte, screeched the brake, and skidded to a

stop by a lone juniper a few yards from a rocky outcrop. “Damn you!” Tate yelled. His hands grabbed the windowsill and Sissy’s hands flew to the dash. Sissy let go a stifled screech and laughed. “Where are we?” she muttered, as she wrapped her arms around Tate.

“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 jeans pocket and fingered the folded paper. *Good, it’s still there.* “Look.” He pulled a piece of violet amethyst crystal from the front pocket of his blue jeans jacket. He 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 T-shirt. “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 shot him a silent glare. He stepped down from the truck, hung a flashlight on his belt, and walked around the rocky butte with that spastic, jerky gait he hated.

Tate and Sissy joined 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, slid his legs in, and pushed until 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. The cold musty scent of damp soil penetrated his lungs.

Rusty flicked on the flashlight. Tate and Sissy squeezed in and scooted over to join him. The granite walls were rough and speckled 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 shone 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. And died! 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 her palm 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 fingertips along the wall.

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

She 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 it, you and T-Taaate. 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 exclaimed. “Oh, come on! You barely squeaked by in high school!”

“And why n-not?” Rusty seethed.

“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,” Rusty blurted, and aimed his angry eyes on Tate. “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.”

“You don’t know him,” Tate insisted.

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

“Tate...? You applied to 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, looked into 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 exhaled a long sigh. “But couldn’t wait. Had to start mechanic’s school. Mom lost her job and 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 narrowed his eyes at Rusty and clenched 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 that the semi-dark 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 yelled, “fall on your face.”

“Tate, honey,” Sissy broke in. “Why couldn’t he go to—?”

“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.” Tate turned to his brother. “Okay,” he said, “here’s my offer. I’ll see if they can use you at the shop. You know, errands, or something. Office work. Filing maybe.”

“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?”

“Of course, you’re not no good,” Tate said, shaking his head. “But be realistic.”

“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, pushed her shoulders through, squirmed and pulled, and disappeared into the Devil’s Grip. “Hey, I made it.” Her muffled voice echoed up the tunnel. “It’s creepy in here, like a dungeon.”

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

Rusty began to sweat, thinking of Tate and Sissy being squeezed, being gripped in a vise. Whisperings floated from the tunnel, like mumblings from the underworld.

After a while, Rusty heard scrapes and groans, as Tate emerged from the dungeon. Sissy eased through the hole, slapped the dust off her pants, and tucked in her shirt.

Tate crawled across the Devil’s Porch to the exit. “We’re out of here.”

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

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

“But wait, dammit,” she called after him. “My friend Lee brought it all the way from China!” Huffing an aggravated sigh, she scrambled from the cave with Rusty close behind. They followed Tate to the pickup, the gravel crunching under their feet. “But Tate,” she tried one more time, “My barrette... the gift... my friend!”

“Your BFF?” Tate teased, his hand on the door. “Come on. It’s just a silly trinket.”

Rusty slid into the driver’s seat and tossed his flashlight on the floor. As Sissy scooted into the cab, she happened to spot the empty beer cans piled behind the seat. “Whoa,” she murmured. She turned swiftly to Tate at the cab door. Sissy turned to him. “Tate, sugar, can you see if I left my purse in the back?”

Tate stepped away to the truck bed. Sissy grabbed 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’s gonna get you nowhere. What about your caves and your crystals?”

What about your mom? And Sandra? And all the other Sandras out there waiting for you?"

Rusty's face flushed.

Tate appeared at the door. Sissy and Rusty sat in a stiff pose, facing straight ahead, as Tate joined them on the seat. "Didn't see any purse," he grouched.

"Whoops... found it." Sissy grinned, holding up her handbag. "Now Tate... hon. How are you gonna get me another cloisonné barrette? All the way from 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. Sissy snuggled against Tate, and Tate stared out the window. Rusty gripped the steering knob, his head spinning. He knew now what he had to do. He would brave the Devil's Grip and retrieve the barrette. He would go to Sissy, open his hand, 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.

The next evening, Tate was at Sissy's and Rusty's mom was working late at the café. Near midnight, Rusty shrugged his jacket on, laced his hiking boots, and grabbed his flashlight and a six-pack of Coors.

He drove to the sandy arroyo, parked by the lone juniper at the outcrop, and chugged a cold beer. A coyote yipped close by. He cranked open another beer and downed it, easing his breath 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. Tossing his flashlight into the "rat hole," he squeezed through the first shaft to the Devil's Porch and crawled across the gravel to the Devil's Grip on all fours like a supplicant. The tunnel loomed before him like 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 until his breathing slowed. *Man, I'm thirsty. Wish I'd brought that beer.*

Removing his jacket, he dropped the flashlight into the tunnel, inserted both arms, and jammed in his shoulders, forcing, squirming, gliding on pea gravel bit by bit. His shoulders landed on the other side.

Rusty gathered his quivering legs from the tunnel and darted the light beam around. The 'dungeon' was a small room with a low granite ceiling that grazed his head, its slab walls leaning in like a condemned building. Shadows danced along the walls, the flakes of feldspar as luminous as a shattered moon. He scanned the reddish-brown dirt floor and found the scuffed spot where Tate and Sissy had been. And there it was—the barrette, its gold trim gleaming in the dirt. *Ha! Too cool!* He wiped the barrette on his jeans, watched it flicker in the flashlight beam, and stuck it in his back pocket. *Yes, Tate, this is reality. Rusty Serrano is not no good for nothin'.*

He scooted to the tunnel—to the Devil's Grip—eager to exit, and reached up and in with both arms, the flashlight in his fist. Shoving and wriggling, he forced his shoulders. But they didn't fit. They had to fit. The tunnel was the only way out.

He tried forcing his shoulders again and thrusting his spastic legs. *Damn. It's uphill now.* This time, the loose dirt and pebbles worked against him, sliding him down. He pushed his trembling feet and wormed his way toward the top until his fingers touched the outer ridge of the tunnel. *Got it!* And that's when his body reached the worst of the bottleneck. The Devil's Grip closed around his torso like a cinch. He could go no farther. His reaching arms

were stuck and his legs stretched way down, unable to push or pull. His sweating hands twisted and turned, but couldn't dislodge his chest. The earth had him in a vise.

The flashlight grew dim. He struggled and crammed his body until his shoulders and hips were jammed like a plug. His throat clenched down on the rising panic. He pressed again with his feet. His legs convulsed. The jerky rhythms jolted his hip and 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.

The dream ... the damn dream. His body twisted and writhed, gasping for air. The earth, the world, had him in a Devil's hand, a Devil's Grip. Squeezing 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 imagined a tether, a tie, wrapped around his ankles, his knees, felt it coil and twine around his hips, his waist, pinning his arms to his side. He saw himself walking, sleeping, talking, with this cord ramming 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. Sweat poured down his neck. He pushed again. His legs jerked and quivered, jostling him loose. His body slipped down and his feet hit the dungeon floor. "Oh, G-God..." His spasms triggered again, shaking his thighs in a terrible rhythm. "N-No," he sobbed. "L-Let go!"

The flashlight went 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 be free. This was reality. He was helpless.

“No!” he screamed. He sucked air into his frantic lungs and heaved. But the Grip, the cinch, closed on his middle again, like a demon. Sweat poured from his arms, his chest. His breath came in gasps. He forced his hips forward and reached until his hand grasped the far end of the tunnel. He felt another squeeze of the vise.

Rusty closed his eyes, inhaled a long breath, and tried once more, easing into the hole slowly, smoothly, squeezing himself thin. His body slid upward a bit, then some more. He tugged his way until his fingertips felt the far edge of the shaft. “L-Let me g-go!” he screamed.

No, no, no! Breathe deep. This time, Rusty opened his lungs, and released his breath like the bleeding of bile, until he was empty, clear, drained. He closed his eyes and lay a long while as visions drifted by: his home... his bed... his crystals. He thought of his mother, María, forever dragging, tired and alone. He imagined Sissy’s sweet whisperings... and Tate, how he’d rigged the joystick, covered the rent, and rose early for work every morning—for him and for Mom—his engineering dreams diminishing, year by year. Rusty opened his eyes in the dark, feeling thinner... lighter, as if floating, limp, and loose.

Sensing a calmer strength, he reached toward the tunnel entry, and wriggled and tugged. His knuckles ached. He eased himself upward, dragging fingers, shoving feet, scraping his limp body along the rocks. His elbows caught the edge and dragged, prying his torso another few inches. The granite tore at his shirt, ripping shreds away and scuffing skin. Streaks of blood and sweat smeared across his chest as he slid farther and farther and, finally, out and free. Free of the Devil’s Grip.

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

When he awoke, he gathered his jacket and crawled from the cave as the chilly night air stroked his face. He hiked to the high mesa, his boots crunching on the steep, rocky trail to

the flat crest on top of the world. The moonlit mountains—the Davis peaks and the Santiagos—stretched their jagged silhouettes along the horizon to the south, to the west, to the north. Rusty sat on a pile of broken breccia, held his knees, and shivered at the beauty of the vast midnight sky, the rich, rugged landscape he loved, made more mysterious by a half-moon on the rise. He stood tall, stretched his hands high, and breathed deeply, taking in the scents of the desert—pungent, bittersweet. “Not boring,” he said aloud.

Rusty slid the folded paper from his jeans pocket, snapped it out flat, and read the heading in the celestial light: *Sul Ross State University, Admissions Application*. In the dim light, he peered at the line “Name,” where tomorrow he would fill in *Rusty Serrano*.

Rusty dug in his back pocket and retrieved the cloisonné barrette. He caressed the jewel, the purple, the gold, as it glistened in the half-moonlight. Clutching the application, he hiked down the rocky trail with that lurching 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*.

In the first light of dawn, Rusty pulled into a recycling center, dumped his pile of empty beer cans, and headed to Sissy’s. He climbed the porch steps, strolled casually to her door, and knocked, the four remaining cans of the six-pack dangling in plastic rings from his fingers.

Sissy opened the door in her yellow robe, tying the cloth belt. “Hey, what are you—?” Rusty pushed past her and walked to the kitchen table as Sissy followed. 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 announced. “I’m d-done.”

Tate and Sissy stared back at Rusty. “Well...” Tate began.

Rusty pulled Sissy’s cloisonné barrette from his pocket and tossed the “trinket” to the

table where it bounced and clinked and glistened as it settled among the breakfast dishes.

Sissy gasped. Tate stared at the barrette, then at Rusty.

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 stirring spoon to the floor. “Goddamn you!” He chugged his coffee. “Persistent bastard, aren’t you?”

Tate chugged his coffee, grabbed his wallet from the counter, and stomped out the door and down the steps. “I’m just going for the ride,” he said with a shrug. “To help you out.” Rusty followed behind, keeping his silence.

Sissy followed and watched them from the porch, her hands on her hips.

Tate yelled to her, “Call the shop, hon. Tell ’em I’ll be late!” Then he slid into the truck and stared straight ahead, his jaw clenching.

Rusty slipped behind the wheel and fired the engine. On the dashboard, a chunk of quartz gleamed, a crystal of lilac and rose. He peered past Tate at Sissy who gave him a wink.

Rusty wrenched the car around the driveway 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 smirked.

“What’s so funny?” Tate asked, pausing to look at his brother. “So, you think I can do this?”

“You idiot!” Rusty replied, smiling, “w-what d-do you think?”

Tate offered a silent shrug.

Rusty swerved onto the highway. The morning sun rose behind them, burning the scrubby flats. It flooded the jagged landscape with dusty greens and golds. “L-Look at those hills,” he announced. “Feldspar and g-granite and...” The old truck shuddered and shook, and jiggled the crystal to the floor.

Tate retrieved the rock at his feet and held it firmly in his palm. “A geologist, huh?”

Rusty rolled down his window, letting in a rush of hot wild wind. He jerked forward on the joystick and gunned it for Alpine.