

CHAPTER ONE

A Mack truck stopped for Nicki and Daddy an hour after Daddy stuck his thumb out, announcing itself with a wheeze and grind long before it jerked to a halt.

The stooped man and little girl waited on land surrounded by grass to the horizon, not a bump, not a swell in sight, dawn sky from arch of the world to arch of the world.

"This your kid?" the driver asked, throwing the passenger door open.

"Yeah."

"Her mother Mescan?"

Nicki stared at the driver

with almond eyes. The sun slid up another notch, painting blue highlights in her black hair until it shone like a Yaqui mask.

“Okay, okay, fine, no problem, where you going, fella?” the driver asked.

“Wherever you dump us,” Daddy said, pulling his felt hat down, pretending to sleep.

Daddy didn't care. The route never varied, from the Panhandle, on the Oklahoma border, down through West Texas, then up again, like a prowling coyote.

Once they climbed from the latest 18-wheeler, or open-bed truck toting cotton to the gin—white flakes sweeping behind them like a blizzard—once they

were in Olney or Baird or Hamlin or Borger, anyplace, everyplace, Daddy trudged through the neighborhoods mowing lawns for a dollar each.

Chugging down the two-lane, the truck passed sunflowers stretching upward like long-legged suns, and mesquite trees hugging the ground.

Sundown brought them to rocky green hills covered with lush grama grass then a town square. Evening gold gilded the roofs of the buildings, like a blessing.

“This is Encendido, fella, the end of the line,” the driver said.

If Nicki had been less sleepy,

she would have seen two-story Limestone buildings lining a square, like buildings in a cowboy movie, and a red-roofed building squatting in the middle.

But Daddy grabbed her hand and pulled her through the streets toward the edge of town until he discovered the Sunset Motor Courts; separate stucco cabins with parking spaces in front.

“Stay here,” Daddy said, picking Nicki up, crossing the linoleum floor, dumping her on the room’s only bed. She was hungry. It had been a long time since the truck driver gave her the sandwich. The room smelled bad and it was dark.

A monster was hiding in the closet. Nicki covered her head

with the grimy chenille bedspread, then dreamed she ran from a hulking thing, chasing her, help, daddy help.

Flinging the door open, Daddy staggered into the room and fell across the bed, waking Nicki.

Daddy did not bring food and Nicki was so disappointed she cried. Her stomach screamed.

Daddy snored, but woke when a man wearing a cowboy hat pushed his way inside the room and hauled him to his feet.

Sticking his hand into Daddy's pockets, the man hauled out a wad of dollar bills and waved them in front of Daddy's nose: "Taking this right in front of the bartender was not

smart. You're under arrest," the man said.

Inside the car, a grill separated the front and back seats. But it was a short ride because the man stopped in front of a building with barred windows.

"You're gonna have to sleep with my kids," the man told Nicki, and took her into a room where children cuddled together on a bed like a litter of warm puppies, breath whistling in and out of their mouths.

Yelling woke her. "He's daid, come quick, he done hanged himself," a man called, "come on, I don't wanna stay with no daid man."

Following the noise, the

children found Nicki's daddy hanging in his cell, his neck stretched by a bed sheet tied to the cell's top bar, his toes almost touching the floor.

A tall redheaded man leaned on the bars of his cell: "You keeping kids in jail now, Horace?"

The redheaded man's cell door gaped open.

"Shut up Frank, you're still under arrest until I find out if that bartender needs a doctor. Stay in that cell," the deputy said, standing on the cot, cutting the rope from Daddy's neck.

The hanged man fell like a sack, and Nicki saw his purple tongue bulging from his mouth.

"Daddy, wake up," she

cried.

"Is that his little girl?" Frank asked.

Then Frank flung the cell door open, picked her up in his warm arms, walked from the jail, dropped her into his convertible and drove them through the familiar dark flecked with stars.

Nicki's eyes drooped in the lulling wind and she slept until the car stopped at a house surrounded by night.

A porch light came on and a tall woman with white hair came to the car, her silver hair floating toward them like a ghost.

"I'm assuming you brought this disgrace on yourself," the woman said. "The deputy called. He said he's charging you with

assault.”

“Did you call that worthless attorney?”

“I certainly did. But if I could afford to lose you I’d let you rot in jail.”

“Paulita, take this kid,” Frank said, dropping Nicki into the woman’s arms

“I want Daddy,” Nicki said.

“Her father’s worm bait, hung himself. He was just some bum and the kid needs a home,” Frank told Paulita.

“She must have family.”

“Deputy says the man wouldn’t give his last name, has no way to trace him.”

The flashlight blinded Nicki.

“She looks like my daughter. Do you remember what your mother looked like?” the woman asked.

“No.”

“Ana was unhappy with your father.”

“My father spreads misery like horse shit. Why don’t you kick him off this place?”

“We need him.”

“I can run a ranch without him.”

“Forgive him. People do not always marry well.”

“You don’t say. Look Paulita, I want this kid, be like having a puppy.”

They walked to the house, Doña Paulita's flashlight wavering in front of them, like a lighthouse searching for lost ships.