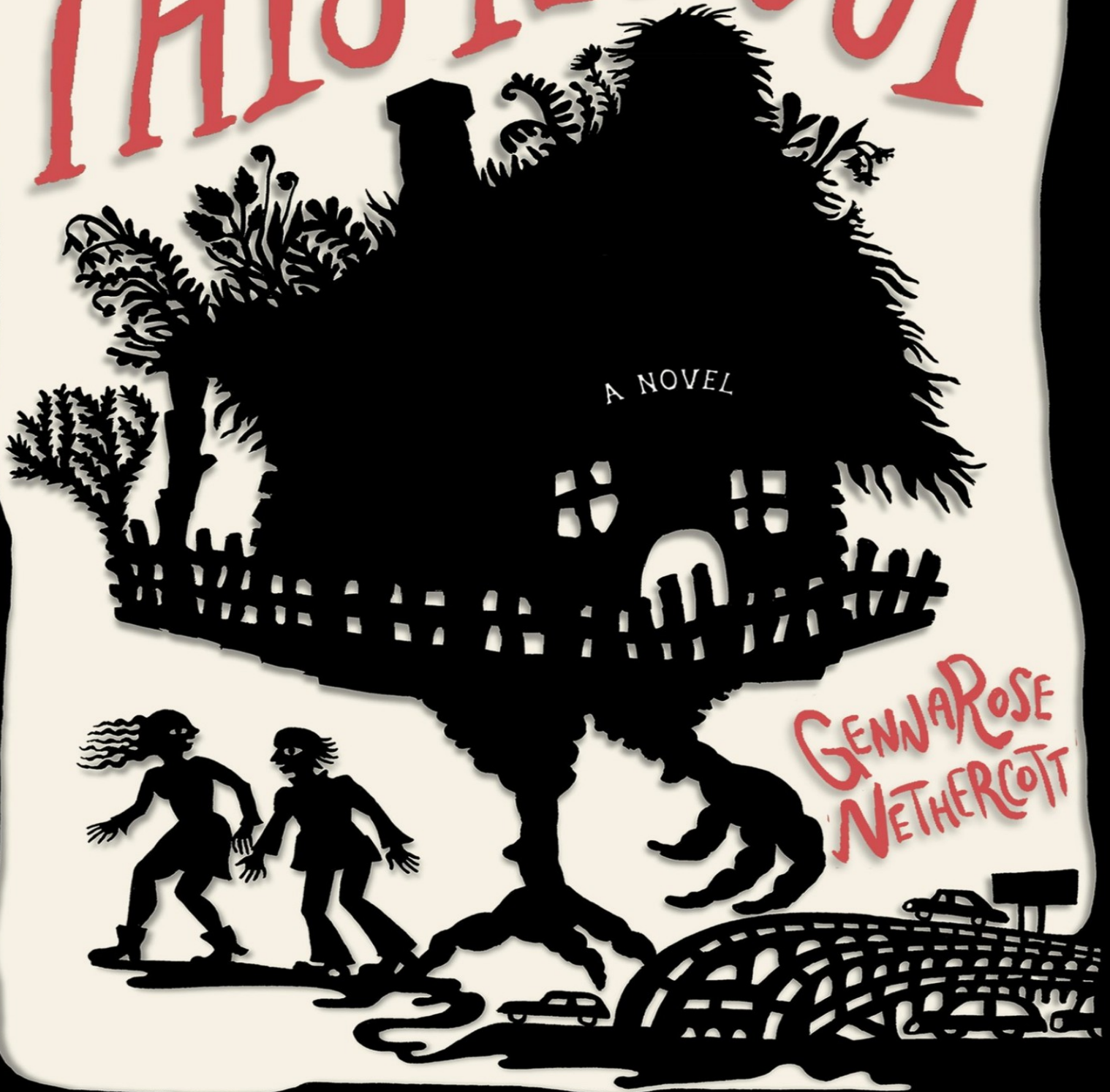


TRISTLEFOOT

A NOVEL

GENNAROSE
NETHERCOTT



Thistlefoot



GennaRose Nethercott



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For my father, Michael Nethercott

For my mother, Helen Schepartz

For my brother, Rustin Nethercott

*And for all our ancestors who waltzed, baked bread, loved, fought, and
survived the impossible so that we could at last, here in this gentle sliver of
time, meet*

PROLOGUE

BEHOLD: *KALI TRAGUS*, THE Russian thistle. A bushy lump of a plant, green flowers vanishing into green leaves. Its stem, striped red and violet as a bruised wrist. The leaves are lined with spikes, sharp like stitching needles. You are advised to wear gloves when handling it, if you must handle it at all. Should the thorns prick you, pretend you don't feel it. It doesn't do any good to gripe in times like these. There are worse wounds to be had than a thistle prick. Much, much worse.

The Russian thistle swells to life in the most arid climates. It thrives on disturbed land—flourishes in those places where a strange violence occurred. Among burned crops. Thirsty fields. Once-thriving farmlands ravaged by blight. Despite it all, the Russian thistle survives. Multiplies. It can grow between six and thirty-six inches tall. When it dies, it breaks off at the base and journeys across the earth, dropping seeds as it travels. The thistle moves like a living beast, rolling and waltzing in the summer wind, licking up dust, shimmying against the unhinged expanse of the land.

There's a story people tell about a man back in Russia who was executed by the state. His head was severed. When the head thumped to the ground, it turned into a fat fox and ran out through the crowd of onlookers, out of the city limits, out into the forest where it lives to this day. The Russian thistle, it's not so different—rent from the root and running, running.

But then, you knew this plant already. Even if you've never been to the old country, nor dragged your fingertips along photographs of the steppe, nor paged through yellowed tomes of Slavic folktales, you know it. You've seen it in old films, somersaulting down desolate stretches of highway. Coyote plant, wind-howler, the starting pistol of every good standoff. When

you see the *Kali tragus*, you can almost *taste* lonesomeness, bitter somewhere in the back of your throat, or smell it in the air like a perfume. It represents all words left unsaid, stories untold, the memories that have been kicked up by storms and carried off across the untamed prairie. So many meanings, many names. *Kali tragus*, the Russian thistle, windwitch—the tumbleweed.

Did you think the tumbleweed was from here? Montana, perhaps? Nebraska? No. It is a foreigner, too, like so many of us. In 1873, Russian immigrants arrived in South Dakota, selling off and planting flaxseed they had carried with them from their home villages. The seed, unbeknownst to them, had been contaminated with thistle. Before long, the invasive species spread across the western United States, quickly becoming one of the most common weeds of the West's drier regions. The seeds traveled by threshing crews, wriggling out into wheat fields and orchards. They hopped trains, hiding in boxcars. They voyaged in wagons and bootheels, in the bellies of rodents and the talons of birds. They traveled in great windblown wheels, churning up dust. They fed mule deer and sheep, elk and prairie dogs, quails and small mammals scabbling in the soil. During the Dust Bowl, when grazing was scarce, cattle farmers filled their herds' bellies with thistle.

Soon the tumbleweed had become one of the Wild West's most iconic characters. A grand joke, no? This paragon of Americana—secretly an immigrant, after all. The Russian thistle disguised itself well. Put on a costume built of country songs and sharpshooters and pale rivers of smoke.

They say that if you wear a mask long enough, you become what you pretend to be. Perhaps the Russian thistle is more story now than anything else. Perhaps the tales we tell about it have replaced what it once was. No more women clucking in Yiddish over thistle caught in their skirts. No more European winters graying the weeds to ash. No more shtetl gates to tangle into. Instead, a slow, long whistle under an open sky. Who can claim to know the weed's true home anymore? Even the seeds themselves have forgotten.

...and yet.

Back in the old country, fires bloom like fields of red poppies. Kyiv, Chernihiv, Odesa. Shops and homes looted. Villages pillaged. Jews hanged in their own kitchens from the rafters, brown bread still rising in the oven. Who can tell if the room is warm from the baking, or from the torch thrown through the open window? Outside a burning synagogue, a spark catches a stray thistle plant aflame—a gouge of gold light cutting open the dusk. The thistle is swallowed by heat. A fireball howling within a crumbling city.

At this same moment all across America, tumbleweeds burst into fire. They blaze tangerine orange, a nation of lanterns swaying in the breeze. And still, they roll, thousands of Moses' burning bushes spinning across the prairie. Even an ocean away, something of them remembers. Even though they cannot see their old cities burn, the thistle burns with them. Even in a new land, their molecules reach backward, through time, through their own name, through a thousand stories, and erupt into beacons of sorrow. Beacons of light.

CHAPTER ONE

“WELCOME, MY ULTIMATE BABES, you thieves and lovers, to the greatest spectacle this side of the Mississippi!”

Isaac Yaga curtsied before the crowd, his black thrift-store suit splitting slightly in the knees. He had obsidian hair that levitated in soft waves around his head, as if experimenting with gravity. His face was pale and narrow, punctuated by a leaning, crow-like nose and pupils sharp as polished lead. If he had eaten well in the past month, you wouldn't know it, his skeleton floating inside the old suit with room to spare.

Standing atop a sagging milk crate, he widened his arms to the crowd below. An invitation. Applause and a few rough hollers overtook the audience as Isaac straightened up, sweeping a charcoal curl from his forehead, where it had drooped. On a square of cardboard at his feet, a svelte black cat lounged, licking a paw. The cat ignored the clamor with poise. The show continued.

Thirty or so spectators had gathered in the street around them. It was the same horde of French Quarter tourists Isaac always lured in—drunken businessmen who spent their meager annual vacations chugging passion fruit hurricanes out of disposable goblets and wreathing themselves in plastic beads, their mistresses peacocking on their arms. Isaac winced at their endless guffawing as they stumbled through Bourbon Street's gutter milk after dusk. He despised the way they treated the city like a playground, rather than a breathing, thrumming home where real people lived. Where real people died.

But it wasn't as if Isaac was much better. Wasn't he, too, only flickering through? Here a few months, then gone—the same as ever.

“First off, welcome to the great city of New Orleans. If you like my little show today, I’d greatly appreciate any small tokens you might care to offer me, a wretched showman. I know you came here dreaming of the lowliest ways to spend your hard-earned wages—and I assure you, friends, no money is dirtier than cash spent on street barkers.” Isaac winked at the audience. The cat blinked.

Isaac always had a way of wooing a crowd. His voice was clipped and dexterous like a trained acrobat, his tightrope-tongue rarely interrupted. When he spoke, people listened. Were you to encounter him up close, near enough to catch the amber flecks in his tobacco-brown eyes, you’d be surprised to find Isaac’s sight peering not outward at you, at the world, but rather, reversed, down an inward tunnel. Yet, the performer Isaac was bold as a cannonball. A master manipulator, able to tug small, invisible strings in the air and make an audience’s attention leap up like a marionette. If such a thing as possession exists, one could surely make a case that Isaac Yaga was prone to it, overtaken by some stage demon, an actors’ poltergeist, a thousand players’ ghosts overflowing from him and bounding out into the onlookers’ laps.

“Now, if y’all can take out these little devils”—he waved his phone in the air—“and please turn them up as loud as possible. All the way up. That’s it. If your phone rings during the show, you have to buy me a drink, and we’re all in favor of that sort of thing.”

He didn’t truly care about disruptions. But the banter put the crowd at ease, and he needed them to trust him. In reality, a phone chiming amid the cacophony of Royal Street was a single droplet of noise in a great ocean. The Quarter was swollen with sound: clarinet wails boiling over like kettles too long on the stove, hollering soap sellers looming in shop fronts with candy-like samples slivered on mirrored trays, kids tap-dancing with bottle caps glued to the soles of their sneakers, and farther off, beyond the levee, the haunted calliope of the Steamboat Natchez, whose carnival song could be heard even a mile away, two miles, ten, onward...

It was nothing like performing in the cold silence of the Yaga family puppet theater where Isaac was raised. There, the slightest cough would

reverberate like thunder through miles of green velvet curtains. He had always felt that quiet as a presence, rather than an absence. A molten hush, like liquid mercury swaying in thick silver waves. When he was a child, there had been times when the silence felt suffocating, like being held underwater. Other times, it felt like a friend. In any case, it had been a long while since he had stood on that dark stage, or felt the suspension of a held breath just before the curtains rose. Busking for drunk sightseers, on the other hand, was one disturbance after another. You got used to it.

“You, sir, with the yellow tie. Yes, you. Come on up here. That’s it—What’s your name?”

“Brian,” replied the man. Three men beside him—friends or colleagues—chuckled and clapped him on the back.

“Tell me three things about yourself, Brian. Can be anything: favorite food, shoe size, what you do for work, the last time you had your heart irrevocably shattered. Any three facts about you, Brian.”

“Uh, favorite food...” The man in the yellow tie struggled, blank-faced.

“These are just examples, Brian. Anything. Anything at all. What are you doing here in New Orleans?”

“I’m here from Cincinnati, for the orthodontics conference down at the convention center. I design parts for X-ray machines. I don’t know, what else do you need?”

But already, Isaac had begun clicking into place—thousands of tiny clockwork gears in his body aligning with all the little gears in the man across from him. In the milliseconds between words, Isaac memorized the precise way Brian’s muscles tugged his mouth to move—and readied his own mouth to mimic it. He studied the shapes of the eyebrows, one arching slightly higher than the other, which triggered a ligament connecting to the apple of the man’s right cheek, easing it upward to match. He took in the precise degree at which the man’s knee bent while leaning on the right hip, the notes in his vocal range as he spoke, the way he divided his sentence for breath or emphasis. And lastly, always last, Isaac looked directly into the man’s eyes. Isaac was a mirror, and the man named Brian’s reflection tumbled in, heartbeat by heartbeat, cell by cell.

“Brian, old boy, are you ready to meet your match?”

Then, Isaac transformed. There was no Isaac anymore. Only Brian, standing face-to-face with himself.

Showtime.

Fools without an actor’s keen eye might have mistaken this display for pure magic. A bodily alchemy, exchanging one form for another. And surely there *was* some enchantment to it, though if prodded, Isaac would insist on his skill and skill alone. A cartography. Each body, he’d say, is a map, rivered with tendons and capillaries, peaked with mountains of muscle, bone, cartilage, fields of skin. Isaac had spent years training himself to read this map and duplicate it with a surgeon’s precision. By studying a person closely enough and isolating the muscles in his own narrow body, Isaac could reproduce the gentlest tic of each limb, the slope of an eyelid, the elbow’s birdlike angle. Simple, scalpel-sharp imitation.

Brian squinted and took a startled step back. What he saw wasn’t possible. *Couldn’t* be possible. It was as if he had caught his own reflection in a shopwindow—somehow, the young man across from him had *become* him. Brian’s colleagues began to notice the change, too. One let out a single booming chortle like an angered horse. Another tossed his head back and forth between Brian and the Isaac who was now Brian as if trying to shake water out of his ears. Hopping down from the milk crate, Isaac hoisted Brian’s arm into the air like a victory flag, parading in a circle through the audience so every member of the crowd could observe the transformation. Each footstep of the two men, in tandem. Every little twitch and gesture, perfectly aligned. By now, Brian had become the secondary version of himself, a shadow, while Isaac was undoubtedly the more genuine Brian of the pair. As if joining the charade, the little cat marched alongside. Two Brians, one feline, and a mass of tourists all thrumming with the electricity of what appeared to be a terrible, demonic miracle taking place in the center of Royal Street.

And what came next? Chaos. Releasing Brian from his theatrical duty, Isaac wove through the crowd. He zeroed in on face after face, body after body, chameleoning between identities. A crooked-spined old man. A set of

young twins, increasing their rank to triplets. A handsome couple on their honeymoon. An entire Norwegian bachelor party. A librarian with a broken leg. The mass went dizzy keeping up, Isaac spinning through a carousel of faces and postures and personal tics until at last, he stopped death-still and let the many identities shed from his bones like old snakeskins. The audience shattered into applause. Wallets flung their leather wings wide, cash fluttering toward Isaac in emerald flocks.



Before the crowd's frenzy calmed, Isaac slipped away, the little black cat still bobbing at his feet. He had almost rounded the corner onto Dauphine when someone grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved him hard. Isaac's face collided with brick. One hand was gripping him by the hair, another smashed into his back, squeezing him chest-first against a wall. *Muggers*. It wasn't uncommon to be held up while walking alone—though rare in the daylight. Isaac couldn't see the person pinning him, but he could feel hot, ragged breath on the back of his neck. *Drunk?*

“Got him, boys!” the owner of the hands called out. Two sets of footsteps followed, running. “You think you can steal from us, you little shit?”

Okay, maybe not muggers. Isaac twisted his head against the wall just enough to glimpse two men running toward him. White guys in button-downs and khakis, slicked-back hair, expensive watches. Conference fashion. They were Brian's colleagues, the ones who'd ogled dumbly as Isaac had mimicked their friend. Isaac strained against the first man's hold. He tasted blood where his teeth ground into the inside of his bottom lip.

“The little fish is wriggling!” Isaac's captor laughed. “Look, fellas, I caught a scrawny one. Think I should throw it back? Won't be much good to fry up.” His hold tightened. Who knew orthodontists had so much nauseating machismo?

It would be only a few moments before the man flipped Isaac face forward to search his pockets. Isaac closed his eyes. He inhaled. Forced the

small muscles of his face to squeeze and move, let his posture slump, his spine compacting in the man's grasp. Another yank of Isaac's coat, and he was jostled around to face the three men.

Isaac's eyes were wide and moony, filling with tears. "Please don't hurt me. Here, do you want money? I have money!" His voice had leavened two octaves higher, and his hands trembled like a little boy's. He gestured with his chin toward his pants pocket. His face looked impossibly young, no more than twelve or thirteen. Even his height had changed, barely reaching the men's shoulders.

One of the pursuers stumbled, drunken confusion clouding his expression. "Cramer, that's not him."

"Course it's him," said Cramer, his hold on Isaac still firm.

"I don't think that's him, man."

The third colleague weighed in. "This is what he does, he's a con artist, he impersonates people."

"Please," whimpered Isaac, "I don't know who you people are. I want my mom."

"Are we *sure*, though? 'Cause if it's not him..."

The black cat hissed at the assailants, scratching at the nearest man's shin.

"Come on, you moron," Cramer sighed, kicking the animal away. "That's his frickin' cat, it's *him*."

But in the debate, Cramer's grip had loosened just slightly. That was all Isaac needed. His full posture snapped back, the age returning to his face. He ripped free of the man's hold, scooped the black cat up in one hand, and bolted down Dauphine, rounding onto Ursulines. The men bounded after. It might be three to one, but Isaac knew the map of the city by heart, and his pursuers were clumsy with drink. Half a block behind, he could hear the slap of dress shoes striking pavement as the men pounded after him. He whizzed past Burgundy Street. If he could make it to the busy intersection ahead, he could lose them, vanish into another crowd. He grabbed a signpost, using it as an axle to swing his body around another sharp corner. As he did, he nearly collided with two girls on bicycles, who shrieked,

swerving to avoid him. Just ahead, a red trolley chugged lazily down the street. *Come on, almost...* Isaac sped up. Just as the trolley reached the intersection of Ursulines and North Rampart, Isaac dove in front of it, landing neatly across the road. The men skidded against one another, trapped on the other side. Between them, the red trolley car chugged sweetly past. He'd lost them. Their shouts faded into the Natchez's song.

“Not bad, eh, Hubcap?”

The little cat rolled onto her back, belly up. Isaac took the gesture as an agreeing nod. He tongued his bruised lip.

Isaac was crouched on the back stoop of his shotgun apartment, leafing through the stack of poached wallets, one by one. A sharp throb stitched through the front of his skull. He leaned his head against the chipping pink paint of the house's back wall, eyes closed, waiting for the ache to pass. When it began to abate, Isaac rolled a cigarette on his knee, adding a pinch of lavender. Soon floral smoke lofted in ringlets around him.

It wasn't being slammed into a brick wall that had brought on the migraine (though that certainly hadn't helped). The headaches always came when he went too long without performing. It had been that way since he was a boy, as far back as he could remember. The only thing that soothed the pain was to become someone else, even for a little while. Before that afternoon's demonstration on Royal Street, it had been nearly a week and a half since he'd last stood in front of a crowd. Time had slipped by too slyly. It moved as a green fog rising up from the levee, soft and bodiless. A day could easily swell into a week. A week, into a month, lost to liquor and muggy heat and the howls of passing freight trains. But Isaac's hiatuses always caught up with him. A jackhammer in his temple. His hands, shaky. A staccato twitch to his movements. He might become hungry all the time, or not at all. And worst of all, worse even than the migraines, was the restlessness lodged in the hollow beneath his ribs, like a fox burrowing into

him with its teeth. That was the true indicator it had been too long. Too long as only one person. Too long as himself.

By the cigarette's end, Isaac had sorted the clump of cash and counted it twice through. A good haul: \$415 and change. Enough to pay the month's rent and buy a six-pack of cheap beer for the night. Roughly a third of the money had been given freely. Beyond that, Isaac had skimmed the rest from careless tourists' pockets—Brian's colleagues' among them. A gratuity. They never donated what he was fully worth, not voluntarily—so he made up for the due. And if those deprived of their vacation money tried to recollect the face of the performer who'd waltzed through them sometime after they'd last palmed their wallets? Usually, they were unable to recall his true face, muddled among all the stray faces he'd tried on for size. Even if he walked by them an hour later, they wouldn't be able to place him. Brian's buddies were an anomaly. He'd gotten sloppy. Sloppy was dangerous.

“Hey man, you coming to the Lovelorn tonight?”

Max, Isaac's roommate, appeared in the doorway.

“Carey Lou's playing, and it's free pool on Saturdays.”

Though Max and Isaac had been living together for the better part of two months, their interactions were almost always here, on the back steps of the house. Coming or going. No one sat still for long.

“Might do,” Isaac said.

“I'm taking the truck if you want a ride. If I can get the piece of junk to start up, anyway. I had to get Bones and Chris to jump it yesterday.”

Max was a short, broad-bellied Australian with strong boxer's shoulders. Using a rusty pocketknife, he spread peanut butter onto a stale heel of bread. A small glob had dropped onto his boot, but he either didn't notice or, more likely, didn't care. Hubcap padded over to lick it off.

Isaac prepared the components of a second cigarette.

“Should warn you, though,” Max continued, “I think Nina's started working there. Saw her behind the bar a couple days ago.”

“Your point?” Isaac asked without looking up.

“I just thought you'd want to know,” Max said.

“I’ll see her if I see her. I’m not going to skulk around keeping tabs on her. You shouldn’t either. It’s not gentlemanly, Max.”

“Aw come on, mate, you know that’s not it. I only thought you’d want to *know*.”

Isaac shrugged.

“All right, Chameleon King.” Max shook his head, stuffing the entire hunk of bread into his mouth.

Chameleon King. The moniker had stuck to Isaac years ago and followed him like a shadow. Those who’d just met him assumed it was due to his singular skill as an actor. That was true...in part. But those who spent any real time around Isaac knew there was more to it. In honesty, he’d earned the title because he slithered in and out of loyalties as quickly as a chameleon changed its colors.

Max rolled his eyes, speaking through mouthfuls. “I’ll save a place on my dance card for you. The chariot leaves at ten.”



The call came at eight thirty.

Like all of history’s defining actions, it began as a single small movement. Many thousands of miles away, where the clock read eight hours into the future, one person lifted a device and dialed a predetermined series of numbers. The motion became electrical signals. The electrical signals scurried toward the sky, looped past the moon, reverberated off satellites’ glossy shells, which were colder than frost. They snapped and blinked into radio signals. Catapulted back toward Earth like invisible asteroids. The signals raced sunbeams. They sliced through pale clouds of Mississippi River water. Needled through wires and over rooftops and through drooping garlands of Spanish moss. And then, miraculously, only moments after the first simple human work of dialing had been enacted, Isaac’s phone buzzed in his pocket.

Within an hour, he’d packed a bag and lifted his roommate’s truck keys while the Australian was in the shower. Max was here without a visa—he

wouldn't report a missing vehicle. It was why Isaac had chosen him as a roommate to begin with. The most useful people were always the ones who had something to lose.

In place of the keys, he left a gleaming train-flattened nickel. Isaac may have been a backstabbing trickster, but he wasn't a thief. That is, he never took something without leaving a token in exchange. Payment...whether the party he did business with ever agreed to the deal or not. The nickel glinted on the tabletop like a silver mirror. The engine growled awake. Radio on.

Then, the Chameleon King was gone, northward bound.