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—PAUL TREMBLAY

SISTERS

OF THE



LOST

NATION

A NOVEL

NICK MEDINA

**SISTERS
OF THE
LOST
NATION**



NICK MEDINA

**BERKLEY
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To Nan & Gram

Content Warning

Sisters of the Lost Nation includes content that addresses issues of addiction, drug abuse, murder and death (off-page), physical assault and battery, sex trafficking (off-page), sexual abuse of a minor (off-page), self-harm, and racism. Please read with your well-being and best interest in mind.

PROLOGUE

“Do you hear that?” her uncle whispered.

“Hear what?” she said, refraining from taking a big bite of the caramel apple she’d made.

“The rustling. Over there. In the bushes.”

Her ears strained. The fire burning in the pit between their lawn chairs popped, sending up orange embers that failed to alleviate the encompassing darkness. She shook her head and lifted the apple to the corner of her mouth where she still had teeth capable of piercing the hard flesh; adult incisors had yet to fill the holes in her smile.

“Listen,” he hissed, once more stopping her from taking a bite.

“I don’t hear any—” The rustle of leaves sounded from far off in the yard, back where the manicured lawn merged with the untamed field that bordered the house. “Is someone there?” she asked, tongue lipping against her gums.

“Not someone . . . not really.” Her uncle’s spindly body shifted, making his leather jacket—black as the night, his feathered hair, and the shiny motorcycle he’d rode in on—creak.

She questioned him with her eyes.

“I shouldn’t tell you,” he said.

“Tell me what?”

Twinkling in the orange and yellow light, his eyes, usually brown and warm, looked black now too. “About what I found at work a few months ago,” he said.

She grew silent, thinking about where her uncle worked. The cemetery. “What’d you find?”

“Do you really wanna know?” he asked, pulling on the scraggly beard he’d barely been able to grow.

She nodded. She guessed so.

He slowly leaned forward in his chair.

“I found three unearthed graves,” he said. “Someone dug them up.”

The wind blew, making the fire thrash.

“Why would someone do that?”

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t very smart.” He poked the fire with a stick, casting more embers into the autumn air. “A man, a woman, and Hilaire Broussard—the last official chief of our tribe, our nation—were the three dug up. . . . Do you know what becomes of a body after it’s spent years in the ground?”

She didn’t gamble a guess, she just looked toward the house, wishing her parents would come back out. It’d taken them both to wrangle her tantrum-throwing three-year-old brother to bed.

“The bodies turn to bone,” he said. “Skeletons. They still look like bodies, only without all the skin.” The flames cast shadows that leapt about his face. “That’s what I expected to see when I looked into the open graves,” he said, “skeletons that resembled bodies, a bone for every head, arm, leg, finger, and tiny toe.”

She cast an uncertain gaze at the ground where her little sister sat atop a sleeping bag, legs crisscross applesauce, oblivious to everything their uncle was saying. Her busy tongue licked the caramel from the fruit she wouldn’t eat. It was past her bedtime, but she’d stay up as long as Mom and Dad were busy with their brother; only five, she already knew how to go unnoticed.

“Bones were missing,” their uncle carried on. “Taken.”

The older girl redirected her gaze from her little sister to her uncle, who showed no sign of jest.

“The woman’s fingers were gone,” he said. “Her toes too . . . every little piggy. And the two big bones from her left arm, below the elbow. The man’s skeleton didn’t look like it was missing anything at all, but someone

—*something*—had gnawed on his ribs. There were gashes in the bones. And the chief”—he looked her dead in the eyes—“was without a head.”

She jumped in her seat, causing a glob of warm caramel to drip onto her dress. She wiped it with her free hand, smearing it, getting her fingers sticky.

“The skull was gone, but it wasn’t taken. It, as a matter of fact, took something itself.”

She pulled at the braid hanging along the left side of her face, getting caramel in her hair. “What’d it take?” she asked, wondering how it could take anything at all.

He leaned closer to the fire, inches from the flames.

“A life. More than one. The spirit of a chief, you see, is a powerful thing. The skull became a head again when it was lifted from the grave . . . resurrected.”

“Resurrected?” she echoed.

“Alive again,” he said, his voice measured and grievously low, prolonging every word. “But not like it was before. Not like the old chief. It’s angry now that it’s been ripped from its rest. And ravenous. Hungry for revenge. It’ll eat anyone it encounters. It’ll tear flesh from bone.”

“How?” she said.

“It rolls, gathering mud and moss on its decaying flesh.”

The wind blew again, chillier than before.

“But how do you know what it eats?”

“Because it devoured the person who dug it up.” His expression morphed from serious to sad. “And I’m pretty sure it ate Miss Shelby, too.”

A lump formed in her throat when she thought about Miss Shelby, the only adult she’d ever considered a friend. Miss Shelby had gone missing that summer, followed by whispers that she wasn’t coming back. The girl’s eyes prodded her uncle for more even though she wasn’t sure she wanted to hear it.

“There were footprints in the mud leading *to* the chief’s grave, but none leading away.”

She pondered what that meant, not hearing everything he said. “You swear?” she asked.

“The head is out there and it’s hungrier than ever,” he went on whispering, nodding. He looked to his left, to his right, behind his back. “Spine-chilling is what it is. If you see it, you’ll know what I mean.”

“Have you?”

He nodded slowly. “Remember when we went fishing in June?”

“Yes,” she squeaked.

“And you remember what the fish looked like when we reeled them in from the water?”

She recalled the catfish her father and uncle had caught for supper. She’d watched with curiosity, which had quickly turned to sadness, then dismay as the fish gills gradually stopped gasping at the bottom of the catch bucket, loaded with ice.

“The head has the same eyes as the fish, beady and unblinking, only they’re cloudy and flat, sunken deep into its skull. Its hair grows wild, tangled with beetles, twigs, and burs, and it trails the head like a tail. The flesh itself is rotten and foul, dead as the Heaven and Hell tree, once the tallest old oak on the reservation—its branches stretching for the stars, its roots reaching for the abyss below—and as ragged around its missing neck as the hem of my jeans.” The chain he wore on his wallet rattled as he lifted a foot over the fire, showing off the frayed cuff of his pant leg, streaked with mud. “The mouth”—he paused, clenching his jaw to steel himself—“that’s the worst part of it. It can stretch as wide as it wants . . . wide enough to suck you between its wormy lips.” She thought of the catfish again, their mouths gaping and wide, flanked by whiskers that had curled and turned black after her father had hacked off the fish heads and tossed them into the fire he’d stoked to cook the fish fillets. “It’s got a tongue of old leather and teeth like shattered glass, jagged and sharp. If it sees you, it’ll roll after you, which means you’d better run. And fast! Just one nibble on the back of your heel means you’ll never escape.”

“Never?” Her voice barely made it over the crackle of the fire. She thought of Miss Shelby again. Gone forever. “Can’t it be stopped?”

He shrugged. “Can’t kill something that’s already dead. I don’t have any idea how to stop it. All I know is it’s a good thing you’re not out here alone.”

She suddenly had to pee but didn’t want to walk the fifty feet from the firepit to the back door. Never had home seemed so far away. Never had she been so afraid in the dark.

The leaves rustled in the yard again, closer than before.

“Better not let it get you,” he said.

She sprang up from her seat and grabbed her little sister by the arm, dragging her to safety. The caramel apple she’d been so eager to eat fell to the ground, a gift to the ants. Abandoned, it rolled through the grass, picking up dirt and bits of black ash.

PART I



Day 36
7:21 p.m.
70 Hours Gone

Guided by fear and the muted moonlight, Anna stepped toward the trees, and then she was passing through them, leaving her old reality behind for the one unraveling before her. Black bark to her sides and ash beneath her feet, she smelled the earthy odors of dirt, mud, burnt wood, and something so vile her stomach turned. It was the same smell the wind had wafted her way on the nights she'd been chased. Only the odor was stronger now. Inescapable.

Anna's lowered gaze slowly passed over the ground to the brush surrounding her. The tall grass bore brown-red stains, streaked from the rain. The bushes did too.

Her little brother's voice sounded in the distance, moving farther away. It faded until it was gone, reinforcing that Anna was alone. And though she didn't feel safe pressing forth, she knew she wouldn't feel any better if she turned back.

She couldn't. Not until she knew.

Eyes closed, she coaxed her legs to carry her deeper into the field. The few steps they took might as well have been arduous miles. Reluctant as her legs had been, her eyelids were far more inflexible. When Anna eventually lifted them again, her eyes were like strangers to the darkness, unable to make sense of what was before them, but maybe they just didn't want to. A moment passed and then the horror set in.

Distressing sounds floated toward Anna from a few feet away. A lifeless eye observed her. A dead girl lay rotting on the ground.

Day 1
4:18 p.m.

Her classmates had bowed before her in the cafeteria, shouting, *All hail the king!*

“King” was marginally kinder than the assumptive and vile labels Anna was used to, but the smirks on her classmates’ faces had stripped it of any majesty the title might have possessed. Anna had wanted to say something biting in return, but she knew an ireful “fuck off” wouldn’t slay them all, so she clenched her cinnamon gum between her teeth and said nothing instead, which was precisely what they wanted. For her to shut up and take it so they could laugh and laugh.

She dragged her feet through the dirt after the dismissal bell and told herself not to think about it. Or them. They weren’t worth it. Eight months stood between her and commencement day, after which she’d never have to see her bullies again. Maybe then she wouldn’t be so silent.

The steady beep of a reversing truck and the grumble of heavy machinery carried on the air from across the Takoda Indian Reservation. The noxious scent of hot asphalt came with it. The road beneath Anna’s feet was hard-packed dirt, but it wouldn’t be for long. A construction crew contracted by the Takoda Tribe, to which Anna belonged, had begun paving over the reservation’s dirt roads a month earlier. Soon the reservation would be linked by smooth, black streets like the ones in town, and gone would be the days when shoes got covered in dust from trampling over uneven dirt roads. It was just one more change made possible by the Grand Nacre Casino and Resort on the rez, which had triumphantly opened its doors two years earlier.

Anna stalled where the dirt road met one of the black streets. She recognized the need for change and the pride that came with being able to afford it, but the dark-green-and-purple smear on the asphalt ahead gave her pause. It was the second such smear she'd seen that week; the thirteenth since the construction crew started paving the dirt roads. There'd been plenty of roadkill—opossums, raccoons, armadillos—over the years, but never had there been so many small purple smears.

It wasn't just the asphalt's fault. The cooling weather, as summer turned to fall, drove frogs to search for spots where they could keep their little bodies warm. The black streets retained heat after the sun set far better than the dirt roads ever had.

The purple smear grew as Anna approached until it was wider than the bottom of her boot. It was the largest casualty yet, a bullfrog easily a pound and a half in size. Hind legs and webbed feet jutted out from the smear, indicating that the poor thing had been run down mid-hop. Anna's insides quivered at the sight—sick and sad, though she knew those very legs would be deemed good eatin' if they were battered and fried in any kitchen throughout the state, from Shreveport down to New Orleans. This king of frogs had thrived and survived through the most dangerous stages of its life—egg, tadpole, young adult—escaping threats posed by insects, fish, crayfish, birds, snakes, raccoons, and the froggers who hunted in the bayous and swamps. It'd beaten the odds over and over, only to end up as a wasted smear. Had it hopped a few inches to the left or a few to the right, it would still be the king of frogs, but by some twist of fate, it'd aligned itself for death.

Anna raised her gaze as an old car slowed and swerved around her. It rattled away through the trees on the far east side of the reservation where few went and even fewer resided. She could see her destination in the distance, set within an overgrown field that encompassed it and its lone neighbor nearly a football field away. She carried forth to the mouth of the dirt driveway that led to the abandoned trailer. Despite having been inside a dozen times or more, the sight of it made her feel like she'd just swallowed something slippery and swampy, something like the dead frog, especially

when the sun was sinking. Her stomach churned. She always took a deep breath before running down the drive and up the trailer's rickety steps. And she always looked over both shoulders before going inside.

The door was gone. The trailer was dim. Just over ten years had passed since electricity powered the lamps. It was, in fact, ten years to the day that Anna had sat across the fire from her uncle, listening with horror and fascination as he voiced his theory about what might have happened to the trailer's owner. A sick anniversary only Anna bothered to remember.

Ten years to the day since her fear had been born.

Failing sunlight filtered through the filthy windows and disheveled blinds, casting a dull brown glow on the deflated couch. Anna never sat on it. Never would. She only came for the books. Two large bookcases lined the far wall, each loaded with a collection that had taken the trailer's owner a lifetime to amass. Anna had only begun browsing the collection a few months earlier, back in July after Erica Landry and Amber Bloom—best friends, both nineteen—had vanished into thin air, leaving their families wondering and worrying on the rez. She hadn't been daring enough to enter the trailer before then. The sensation of eyes upon her put her on edge within the trailer's walls, making her suspect that she'd be punished if she got caught. But the books and the wisdom they held, wisdom that might just make her feel safer at night, were worth the risk. The books were everything.

Anna lowered the bag from her back and unzipped it. She pulled three moldy books from within and reinserted them on the top shelf of the bookcase from which they came, proceeding to grab the next three in line, each equally moldy and topped with a layer of dust that turned into a sticky paste when she tried to brush it away. Anna crammed the books into her bag, zipped it, and headed back to the doorway to return to the road where she could pretend she hadn't invaded the trailer at all. A flash of movement through the window made her pause. She squinted through the filth, then jumped back, startled, when a ladybug fluttered past her face and crash-landed against her chest. Its translucent wings folded beneath its red-and-

black shell as Anna ushered the bug onto her palm, wondering what made such small insects so bold.

The movement outside the window continued, and Anna realized it was only a cloud passing over the trailer, casting a shadow that crawled across the windowpane. When her gaze moved up, she saw herself reflected in the dirtiest part of the glass. The rusted metal of the window frame created the illusion of a ragged crown upon her head.

She hadn't done anything wrong in the cafeteria earlier, yet it was she who ended up feeling sorry. And it was her whom Principal Markham had called to his office, where she sat across from the balding man, staring into his expectant eyes, refusing to say anything more than, *They did this*.

Anna slung the backpack onto her shoulders and stepped away from the window and the rusted crown. Outside, she blew the ladybug from her palm and dashed down the dirt drive to the slick, new street. The purple smear added to the slimy sensation in her stomach. She stepped over it, coaxing her eyes to remain on the horizon, but the memory of what she'd seen when she inspected the smear earlier brought her to a stop. The frog had certainly been run over, but Anna couldn't recall seeing tread marks stamped into the remains. She only assumed a tire had done the damage because the frog was in the road.

Reluctantly turning, she bent to inspect the former king of frogs once more. No marks. Something other than a tire had apparently squashed it. Something softer. Something smoother. Anna shivered. She tried to cast the thought aside, but suppressing it wasn't any easier than casting aside the incident at school.

All hail the king!

Her eyes darted back toward the condemned trailer, seeking a place to hide.

"Shit," she said, when she spotted something dark and round, slightly larger than a bowling ball, shifting from side to side beneath the trailer's rotting steps. It was the very thing she feared, the very thing that must have flattened the frog, the thing that might have made Amber and Erica disappear.

Anna turned toward home, only for her head to reel around on her neck. The round form was gone from beneath the trailer's steps. Vanished. Her flesh prickled as though swarmed by biting mites. Something moved in the overgrown grass along the edge of the dirt drive. The tall brown blades shimmied. Whatever had slipped inside the undergrowth was moving in her direction, picking up speed the closer it got.

Anna gasped and ran. The books in her bag thumped against her back all the way home.