
THREE

Mercifully, Richter hadn't seemed to notice Leopold's bizarre interaction with the parking garage attendant, nor had he seen the wings—because, of course, they hadn't been there.

Leopold knew from experience that his episodes tended to cluster in threes. The raccoon had been the first; what happened in the garage, the second. Given what usually triggered them—and how badly he wanted to be anywhere other than trapped in the car with his father in steadily thickening traffic—it seemed reasonable to expect that a third would be along anytime now.

He couldn't let it happen.

Not while he was behind the wheel of a moving car, especially with Richter riding shotgun. Telling his dad what was happening to him was not an option, so Leopold focused on the road ahead and pretended Richter wasn't there, nodding occasionally to simulate listening. Maybe this way he would make it home without seeing any more flame-engulfed fauna or parking-garage angels. Maybe this way he wouldn't blank out for thirty seconds and crash the car.

“Damn it, Larry, I said take Fountain!”

Richter's sudden bellow pulled Leopold from his reverie and back into La Cienega Boulevard's rightmost lane, where he'd just missed a

crucial turn. This sparked the Always Take Fountain speech, which he endured with little nods and apologies.

He'd learned early in life that there was no arguing with his dad. That would only prolong the lecture and raise its emotional temperature a few notches on the Richter Scale. You just had to endure, and eventually he'd wear himself out. The lectures could be cool-tempered speeches or angry tirades, but they always fell into one of a few categories, so predictable Leopold had given them names. After they'd left the garage and become enmeshed in traffic, Richter had launched into an impassioned delivery of *I've Never Been So Embarrassed in My Life*, an old favorite. He then veered into *You've Got No Ambition*, downshifted into *Aren't You Ashamed of Yourself*, and pirouetted with virtuosic flair into a weirdly self-pitying version of *It's My Fault for Spoiling You*—all interspersed with highlights from *Larry's a Shitty Driver*, a classic Leopold could've recited from memory.

At a red light he felt the Volvo stutter and threaten to stall. He shifted into neutral and feathered the gas so it wouldn't die in the middle of the road, which would almost certainly trigger a high-volume rendition of *I Should Sell This Shitheap for Scrap*—which, of all his father's lectures, was the one Leopold hated most.

The Volvo—Bessie—was Leopold's dearest possession. She was egg-yolk yellow and speckled with rust and had belonged to his mother. Richter regularly threatened to get rid of it because it was unreliable and ugly and didn't fit the Berry brand. That he never followed through on his threats seemed a rare proof of kindness in his father, as well as a quiet admission that he, too, missed Leopold's mom, though they never spoke about it. It was also, Leopold assumed, the only reason Richter allowed the Volvo to remain in their driveway.

Leopold glanced at the trip odometer.

7,261 miles.

It hadn't been zeroed since she died. Leopold couldn't bring himself to hit the button, because he marked her death with miles rather than years. Five and a half years ago sounded infinite, an unbridgeable vastness. Somehow, 7,261 miles ago felt closer. That was just a long plane trip.

Sometimes Leopold rode his bike or took the bus because he couldn't bear to watch the number creep any higher. Sometimes, when he could no longer stand being in his father's house but had nowhere else to go, he'd slip out and sit in the car for hours, just reading or listening to music. When things got really unbearable, he'd sneak out at night and sleep in the back seat.

Green light.

He shifted into first and the Volvo jerked into motion. At some point the lecture had morphed into a recounting of Leopold's recent failures, Richter totting them up on his fingers. *Cut from the baseball team. Rejected from that internship. Only summer job you could find was in some lousy coffee shop. And now this—*

The steady drumbeat of *loser, loser, loser* threatened to suffocate him.

He willed himself to think of nothing. Instead, watching the odometer tick over another mile, Leopold thought of his mother—and then of Sunder.

One often begat the other.