

Praise for

We Begin at the End

'*We Begin at the End* is surely destined to conquer the world. This intensely captivating story and its uniquely intriguing characters holds you in its jaws till the very last word. Astonishingly good'

RUTH JONES

'I love Duchess Day Radley so much I want to adopt her. She is every thirteen-year-old girl at risk, an outlaw both pure of heart and ill of intent, a fierce and melancholy girl, so memorable she will make camp in your brain and never leave. In *We Begin at the End*, Chris Whitaker has written a gorgeous, crystalline novel, a cautionary tale about the long shadows cast by our past selves, and one defiant girl with the bravery to hope for something better. I love this beautiful book'

JEANINE CUMMINS, AUTHOR OF AMERICAN DIRT

'Rich with character and story, conflict and tension, humor, tragedy and raw, unadulterated guts, this one has it all. Throw in the most compelling young protagonist I've read in at least a decade, and you have a deep and meaningful story that is an absolute delight from first page to last. Nicely done, Mr. Whitaker!'

JOHN HART

'An exceptionally beautiful and accomplished crime novel. I fell head over heels into its big black heart and will carry the characters with me for a long time to come yet. Duchess and Thomas Noble forever'

ALI LAND

'Chris Whitaker takes crime writing to new levels in this evocative and lyrical novel, which is not only beautifully written but cleverly plotted, with a climax you'll never guess'

MARK EDWARDS

'Stunning, intoxicating, heart-breaking – without a doubt one of my favourite books of the year. A compelling story, beautifully drawn characters and writing that leaps off the page: *We Begin at the End* is in a class of its own'

T.M. LOGAN

'If ever there is a book that deserves all the prizes, this is it. So layered and nuanced, and brimming with characters so full of depth they breathe on the page . . . A damn near perfect crime novel'

FIONA CUMMINS

'*We Begin at the End* is the most beautifully written book I have read this year . . . with characters that will tug at your heartstrings, an incredible sense of place and a cleverly plotted mystery, Chris Whitaker is proving himself to be one of the most talented writers around'

LISA HALL

‘Chris Whitaker excels in muscular small-town American Noir . . . The story unwinds to a peak of tension and ends with a series of revelations that hit like a flurry of punches to the gut. A sense of tragedy infuses the story and this, more than anything, makes it one of the year’s best crime reads’

VASEEM KHAN

‘I don’t know where to begin – the total satisfaction of the plot, the absorbing story, the cast of unbelievably incredible characters, the sheer taste of America on the page . . . It’s an absolute masterclass in crime writing and story-telling’

JO SPAIN

‘*We Begin At The End* is as perfect a novel as you’ll read all year. Devastating and hopeful in equal measure, with pitch-perfect characters you’ll root for at each jaw-dropping turn’

CAZ FREAR

‘What a novel! Such a remarkable achievement. So wonderful in so many ways, with writing that is Booker Prize good’

DEBORAH O’CONNOR

‘Breathtaking, heart-wrenching, heart-warming and laugh-out-loud funny, *We Begin At The End* is simply astonishing. Easily the best book I’ve read this year’

M.W. CRAVEN, CWA GOLD DAGGER WINNER

‘An absolute belter of a book. Superb, heart-breaking, astounding and gripping. Chris Whitaker has totally nailed it’

GYTHA LODGE

‘A sensational book. Addictive, beautifully written and immersive. So many layers. So many fascinating characters. Chris Whitaker is an immensely talented writer’

WILL DEAN

‘Gasp-enduring drama and laugh-out-loud humour, Duchess Day Radley is now my favourite character in fiction by far’

TOM WOOD

‘Sometimes a book finds its way to you when you need it most and teaches you a lesson you didn’t even know needed teaching. *We Begin at the End* is one of those books, and it truly is a masterpiece’

ISABELLE BROOM

‘Astoundingly beautiful. No other writer can pull you in quite so well as Chris Whitaker. The writing is pure and sharp, the characters perfectly drawn, the story unforgettable’

REBECCA TINNELLY

ALSO BY CHRIS WHITAKER

Tall Oaks

All The Wicked Girls

WE
BEGIN
AT THE
END

CHRIS WHITAKER

ZAFFRE

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*For my readers, who have come with me to Tall Oaks,
Grace and now Cape Haven. When I'm struggling,
you keep me striving.*

YOU SEE SOMETHING AND YOU raise your hand.
Doesn't matter if it's a cigarette paper or a soda can.
You see something and you raise your hand.
Don't touch it, neither.
Just raise your hand.

The townspeople readied, their feet in the ford. Movement in line, twenty paces between, a hundred eyes down, but still, they held together, the choreography of the damned.

Behind, the town emptied, the echo of a long, pristine summer had been smothered by the news.

She was Sissy Radley. Seven years old. Blond hair. Known to most, Chief Dubois did not need to hand out photographs.

Walk held the furthest side. Fifteen and fearless, his knees shook with each step.

They marched the woodland like an army, cops led, flashlights swept, through the trees was the ocean, a long way down but the girl could not swim.

Beside Walk was Martha May. They had dated three months, confined to first base, her father was minister at Little Brook Episcopal.

She glanced over. "Still want to be a cop?"

Walk stared at Dubois, head down, last hope on his shoulders.

“I saw Star,” Martha said. “At the front with her father. She was crying.”

Star Radley, the missing girl’s sister. Martha’s best friend. They were a tight group. Only one was absent.

“Where’s Vincent?” she asked.

“I was with him before. He might be on the other side.”

Walk and Vincent were close like brothers. At nine they’d cut palms, pressed them together and sworn oaths of classless loyalty.

They said nothing more, just watched the ground, past Sunset Road, past the wishing tree, Chuck Taylors parting leaves. Walk focused so hard but still, he almost missed it.

Ten steps from Cabrillo, State Route One, six hundred miles of California coast. He stopped dead, then looked up and saw the line move on without him.

He crouched.

The shoe was small. Red and white leather. Gold-tone buckle.

A car on the highway slowed as it came, headlights traced the curve till they found him.

And then he saw her.

He took a breath and raised his hand.

Part One
The Outlaw

1

WALK STOOD AT THE EDGE of a feverish crowd, some he'd known since his birth, some since theirs. Vacationers with cameras, sunburn and easy smiles, not knowing the water was stripping more than timber.

Local news set up, a reporter from KCNR. "Can we get a word, Chief Walker?"

He smiled, shoved his hands deep in his pockets and looked to thread his way through when the people gasped.

Fragmented noise as the roof caved and crashed to the water below. Piece by piece, the foundation lay crude and skeletal, like the home was no more than a house. It had been the Fairlawn place since Walk could remember, a half-acre from the ocean when he was a kid. Taped off a year back, the cliff was eroding, now and then the people from California Wild came and measured and estimated.

The stir of cameras and indecent excitement as slates rained and the front porch clung. Milton, the butcher, dropped to one knee and fired off a money shot as the flag pole leaned and the banner hung in the breeze.

The younger Tallow boy got too close. His mother pulled his collar so hard he tumbled back onto his ass.

Behind, the sun fell with the building, dissecting the water with cuts of orange and purple and shades without name. The reporter got her piece, seeing off a patch of history so slight it barely counted.

Walk glanced around and saw Dickie Darke, who looked on, impassive. He stood like a giant, close to seven feet tall. A man into real estate, he owned several houses in Cape Haven and a club on Cabrillo, the kind of den where iniquity cost ten bucks and a small chunk of virtue.

They stood another hour, Walk's legs tired as the porch finally gave up. Onlookers resisted the urge to applaud, then turned and made their way back, to barbeque and beer and firepits that waved flamelight on Walk's evening patrol. They drifted across flagstone, a line of gray wall, dry laid but holding strong. Behind was the wishing tree, a major oak so wide splints held its limbs. The old Cape Haven did all it could to remain.

Walk had once climbed that tree with Vincent King, in a time so far from now it too would barely count. He rested a shaking hand on his gun, the other on his belt. He wore a tie, his collar stiff, his shoes shined. His acceptance of place was admired by some, pitied by others. Walker, captain of a ship that did not ever leave port.

He caught sight of the girl, moving against the crowd, her brother's hand in hers as he struggled to match her pace.

Duchess and Robin, the Radley children.

He met them at half run because he knew all there was to know about them.

The boy was five and cried silent tears, the girl had just turned thirteen and did not ever cry.

“Your mother,” he said, not a question but a statement of such tragic fact the girl did not even nod, just turned and led.

They moved through dusk streets, the lull of picket fences and fairy lights. Above the moon rose, guided and mocked, as it had for thirty years. Past grand houses, glass and steel that fought the nature, a vista of such terrible beauty.

Down Genesee, where Walk still lived in his parents’ old house. Onto Ivy Ranch Road, where the Radley home came to view. Peeling shutters, an upturned bike, the wheel lying beside. In Cape Haven a shade beneath perfect night as well have been black.

Walk broke from the children and ran up the path, no lights from inside but the flutter of television. Behind, he saw Robin still crying and Duchess still looking on, hard and unforgiving.

He found Star on the couch, a bottle beside, no pills this time, one shoe on and the other foot bare, small toes, painted nails.

“Star.” He knelt and patted her cheek. “Star, wake up now.” He spoke calmly because the children were at the door; Duchess, an arm on her brother as he leaned so heavy into her, like he no longer held bones in his small body.

He told the girl to dial 911.

“I already have.”

He thumbed open Star’s eyes and saw nothing but white.

“Will she be alright?” The boy’s voice.

Walk glanced over, hoping for sirens, squinting at fired sky.

“Could you go look out for them?”

Duchess read him and took Robin outside.

Star shook then, puked a little and shook, like God or Death

had hold of her soul and was wrenching it free. Walk had given it time, three decades had passed since Sissy Radley and Vincent King but still Star slurred about eternalism, the past and the present colliding, the force spinning the future off, never to be righted.

Duchess rode with her mother. Walk would bring Robin.

She looked on as the medic worked. He did not try a smile and for that she was grateful. He was balding and sweating and maybe tiring of saving those so determined to die.

For a while they stayed in front of the house, the door falling open to Walk, there like always, his hand on Robin's shoulder. Robin needed that, the comfort of an adult, the perception of safety.

Across the street drapes moved as shadows passed silent judgment. And then, at the end of the road, she saw kids from her school, pedaling hard, faces red. News moved so fast in a town where zoning often made front pages.

The two boys stopped near the cruiser and let their bikes fall. The taller, breathless, a sweep of hair plastered down as he walked slow toward the ambulance.

“Is she dead?”

Duchess lifted her chin, met his eye and held it. “Fuck off.”

The engine rumbled as the door swung closed. Smoked glass made matte of the world.

Cars snaked the turns till they tipped from the hill, the Pacific behind, rocks broke the surface like heads of the drowning.

She watched her street till the end, till trees reached over and met on Pensacola, branches like hands, linked in prayer for the girl and her brother, and the unfurling tragedy that began long before either was born.

Night met others just like it, each swallowing Duchess so totally she knew she would not see day again, not the way other kids saw it. The hospital was Vancour Hill and Duchess knew it too well. When they took her mother she stood on the polished floor, light mirrored up, her eye on the door as Walk brought Robin inside. She walked over and took her brother's hand, then led him toward the elevator where she rode to the second floor. The family room, lights dimmed, she pushed two chairs together. Across was a supply room and Duchess helped herself to soft blankets and then made the chairs into a cot. Robin stood awkward, the tired dragging him, haunting dark circled his eyes.

“You need to pee?”

A nod.

She led him into the bathroom, waited a few minutes then saw he washed his hands well. She found toothpaste, squeezed a little onto her finger and ran it around his teeth and gums. He spit, she dabbed his mouth.

She helped him out of his shoes and over the arms of the chairs, where he settled like a kind of small animal as she covered him over.

His eyes peered out. “Don't leave me.”

“Never.”

“Will Mom be okay?”

“Yes.”

She cut the television, the room dark, emergency lighting left them in red, soft enough that he slept by the time she reached the door.

She stood in clinical light, her back to the door; she would not let anyone inside, there was another family room on three.

An hour and Walk appeared again and yawned like there was cause. Duchess knew of his days, he drove Cabrillo Highway, those perfect miles from Cape Haven to beyond, each blink a still of such paradise people crossed the country to find them, buy their homes and leave them empty ten months of the year.

“Is he asleep?”

She nodded once.

“I went to check on your mother, she’ll be alright.”

She nodded again.

“You can go and grab something, a soda, there’s a machine next to—”

“I know.”

A look back into the room saw her brother sleeping soundly, he would not move until she stirred him.

Walk held out a dollar bill, she took it reluctantly.

She walked the corridors, bought the soda and didn’t drink it, she would keep it for Robin when he woke. She saw into cubicles, sounds of birth and tears and life. She saw shells of people, so empty she knew they would not recover. Cops led bad men with tattooed arms and bloodied faces. She smelled the drunks, the bleach, the vomit and shit.

She passed a nurse, a smile because most of them had seen her before, just one of those kids, dealt a losing hand.

When she returned she found Walk had set two chairs by the door. She checked on her brother then sat.

Walk offered her gum and she shook her head.

She could tell that he wanted to talk, to bullshit about change, a slick on the long road, how it would all be different.

“You didn’t call.”

He watched her.

“Social. You didn’t call.”

“I should.” He said it sad, like he was letting down her or the badge, she did not know which.

“But you won’t.”

“I won’t.”

He had a stomach that strained his tan shirt. The chubby, reddened cheeks of a boy whose indulgent parents never told him “no.” And a face so open she could not imagine he carried a single secret. Star said he was all good, like that was a thing.

“You should get some sleep.”

They sat like that till stars leaned to first light, the moon forgot its place and held like a smear on new day, a reminder of what had gone. Opposite was a window. Duchess stood at the glass and pressed her head to the trees and the falling wild. Birdsong. A long way and she saw water, specks that were trawlers crawling the waves.

Walk cleared his throat. “Your mother . . . was there a man—”

“There’s always a man. Whenever anything fucked up happens in the world, there’s always a man.”

“Darke?”

She held straight.

“You can’t tell me?” he asked.

“I’m an outlaw.”

“Right.”

She wore a bow in her hair and fussed with it often. She was too thin, too pale, too beautiful like her mother.

“There’s a baby just been born down there.” Walk changed it up.

“What did they call it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Fifty bucks says it’s not Duchess.”

He laughed gently. “Exotic by rarity. You know you were going to be Emily.”

“Sore must be the storm.”

“Right.”

“She still reads that one to Robin.” Duchess sat, crossed her leg, rubbed the muscle, her sneaker loose and worn. “Is this my storm, Walk?”

He sipped coffee, like he was searching for an answer to an impossible question. “I like Duchess.”

“You try it a while. If I was a boy I might’ve been Sue.” She lay her head back and watched the strips blink. “She wants to die.”

“She doesn’t. You mustn’t think that.”

“I can’t decide if suicide is the most selfish or selfless act.”

At six a nurse led her.

Star lay, a shadow of a person, even less of a mother.

“The Duchess of Cape Haven.” Star, her smile there but weak. “It’s alright.”

Duchess watched her, then Star cried and Duchess crossed the room, pressed her cheek to her mother’s chest and wondered how her heart still beat.

Together they lay in amid the dawn, a fresh day but no light of promise because Duchess knew promise was a falsity.

“I love you. I’m sorry.”

There was much Duchess could say, but for the moment she could find nothing more than, “I love you. I know.”

2

AT THE CREST OF THE hill the land fell away. Sun climbed cerulean sky as Duchess, riding in the back with her brother beside, took his small hand in hers.

Walk eased the cruiser down their street and pulled up out front of the old house, then followed them in. He tried to fix breakfast but found the cupboards so bare he left them and ran to Rosie's Diner, then returned with pancakes and smiled as Robin ate three.

After she'd washed Robin's face and laid out his clothes, Duchess went out front and found Walk sitting on the step. She watched the Cape begin its modest wake, the mailman passed, Brandon Rock from the house beside came out and hosed down his lawn. That they did not give a second look to the cruiser parked outside the Radley home made Duchess sad and glad.

"Can I give you a ride in?"

"No." She settled beside him and tied her lace.

"I can collect your mom."

"She said she'd call Darke."

Duchess did not know the true nature of her mother's

friendship with Chief Walker, though she guessed he wanted to fuck her, like the other men in town.

She looked out at their tired yard. The last summer she'd set about planting with her mother. Robin had bought a small watering can and softened the dirt, his cheeks colored as he made trip after trip. Blue-eyes, Indian mallow and mountain lilac.

They died of neglect.

“Did she say what it was?” Walk said it gently. “Last night, you know why?”

It was the kind of cruel question she was not used to from him, because, mostly, there wasn't any kind of reason. But this time she knew why he asked, she knew about Vincent King, about her aunt Sissy who was buried in the cemetery by the edge of the bluff. Everyone knew her grave, behind the sun-bleached picket, with the babies that hadn't made it, the children cut down by the same God their parents prayed to.

“She didn't say nothing.”

Behind they heard Robin. Duchess stood and fixed his hair, wiped toothpaste from his cheek with her spit and then checked his schoolbag, that he had his reading book and journal, his water bottle.

She slid the straps over his shoulders and he smiled and she smiled back.

They stood side by side and watched the cruiser pare the long street, and then Duchess slipped an arm around her brother and they began to walk.

The neighbor cut the hose and walked over to the edge of his yard, slight limp he tried hard to correct. Brandon Rock.

Broad, tan. A stud in one ear, feathered hair, silk robe. Sometimes he benched with the garage door up and metal blaring out.

“Your mother again? Someone should call social services.” Voice like his nose had been broken but never fixed. He carried a dumbbell in one hand and curled it now and then. His right arm noticeably bigger than the left.

Duchess turned to him.

Breeze blew. His robe parted.

She wrinkled her nose. “Flashing a kid. I should call the cops.”

Brandon stared as Robin led her away.

“Did you see Walk’s hands shaking?” Robin said.

“Always worse in the morning.”

“Why?”

She shrugged but knew. Walk and her mother, their shared troubles and the way they dealt with them.

“Did Mom say anything, last night, when I was in my room?” She’d been doing her homework, her project on her family tree, when Robin hammered at the door and said Mom was sick again.

“She had her photos out. The old ones, with Sissy and Grandpa.” Robin had taken to the idea of having a grandpa the first time he’d seen the tall man in their mother’s photographs. That he’d never met him, that Star said next to nothing about him, did not seem to matter. Robin needed people, the cushion of barren names that would keep him from feeling so vulnerable. He longed for cousins and uncles and Sunday football and barbeque, like the other kids in his class.

“Do you know about Vincent King?”

Duchess took his hand as they crossed onto Fisher. “Why, what do you know about him?”

“That he killed Aunt Sissy. Thirty years ago. In the seventies, when men had mustaches and Mom wore her hair funny.”

“Sissy wasn’t our aunt, not really.”

“She was,” he said simply. “She looked like you and Mom. The same.”

Duchess had got the bones of the story over the years, from Star when she slurred it, from the archives at the library in Salinas. The same library where she’d spent the past spring working on their family tree. She’d traced Radley roots back far, then dropped the book to the floor when she’d made the link to a wanted outlaw named Billy Blue Radley. It was the kind of find she’d been proud of, something more when she stood up front and presented to the class. There was still a whole load of nothing on her father’s side, just the kind of question mark that drew an angry exchange with her mother. Not once but twice Star had been with a stranger, got herself pregnant, left two children with a lifetime of wondering just whose blood pumped their veins. *Slut*, she’d whispered beneath her breath. It saw her grounded for a month.

“You know he’s coming out of prison today?” Robin kept his tone hushed like it was a grave secret.

“Who told you that?”

“Ricky Tallow.”

Ricky Tallow’s mother worked dispatch at Cape Haven PD.

“What else did Ricky say?”

Robin looked away.

“Robin?”

He folded quick. “That he should’ve fied for it. But then Miss Dolores yelled at him.”

“Should’ve fied. You know what that means?”

“No.”

Duchess took his hand across onto Virginia Avenue, the lots a little bigger. The town of Cape Haven tumbled its way toward the water, land value inverse to the hills; Duchess knew her place, their home on the furthest street from the ocean.

They fell in with a group of kids. Duchess heard talk about the Angels and the draft.

When they got to the gate she fussed with his hair once more and made sure his shirt was buttoned right.

Kindergarten stood beside Hilltop Middle. Duchess would spend her break at the fence, looking over at her brother. He'd wave and smile and she'd eat her sandwich and watch him.

“You be good.”

“Yeah.”

“Don't say nothing about Mom.”

She hugged him, kissed his cheek and sent him in, watching till Miss Dolores took over. Then she moved on, the sidewalk thick with kids.

Duchess kept her head down as she passed the steps, where a group gathered, Nate Dorman and his friends.

Nate, collar flicked up, sleeves rolled over skinny biceps. “Heard your mom got fucked up again.”

Laughter chorused.

She squared to him straight off.

He stared back. “What?”

She met his eye. “I am the outlaw, Duchess Day Radley, and you are the coward, Nate Dorman.”

“You're crazy.”

She took a step forward and watched him swallow. “Talk about my family again and I'll behead you, motherfucker.”

He tried a laugh but didn't quite manage it. There were rumors about her; despite the pretty face and slight frame, she could turn, lose it so bad not even his friends would step in.

She pushed past, heard him exhale heavily as she walked on, into school, eyes burning from another tortured night.

3

THE ERODING CLIFFS RAN A twisting mile before the road swept the bay and vanished into the tall oaks of Clearwater Cove. Walk followed the line, never edging past thirty.

He'd left Duchess and Robin then driven to the King house, bagged leaves from the path and picked litter from the yard. He'd tended it weekly for thirty years, part of his staid routine.

At the station he checked in with Leah Tallow on the front desk, just the two of them, Walk on call every day of his life. From the window he watched seasons change and vacationers come and go. Hampers were left. Wine and cheese and chocolate that saw him punch another hole in his belt each year.

They had an auxiliary, Louanne, she came in when they needed her, parades, shows, or times when she was just plain bored of tending to her yard.

"You all set for today, return of the King?"

"I've been ready thirty years." He tried to keep his smile in check. "I'm heading out, I'll pick up pastries on the way back."

He strolled up Main, same every morning, the practiced walk, the cop stride he'd seen on TV. He'd tried a mustache, like Magnum, made notes when watching *Forensic Files*, and

once even bought a beige raincoat. If a real case ever came in, he'd be ready.

Flags hung from streetlamps, shiny SUVs parked nose to tail and green awnings cast shade over a spotless sidewalk. He saw the Pattersons' Mercedes double parked, wouldn't write it up, maybe just offer a friendly warning when he next saw Curtis.

He quickened by the butcher's but Milton came out fast, then stood on the stoop, whites splashed red, a cloth in his hand like he could rid the stains from his palms.

"Morning, Walk." Milton was hairy. Thick swirls sprouted from every inch of him, the kind of man who had to shave to his eyeline three times a day in case a passing zookeeper shot him with a tranquilizer dart.

Strung deer in the window, so fresh a day back it had been roaming the Mendocino. Milton hunted, during the season he'd close up and don his deerstalker, load the Comanche with rifles and sheets and a cooler of beer. Walk had gone with him one time, couldn't find an excuse that lasted long enough.

"Did you talk to Brandon Rock yet?" Milton spit the name, every word labored, like he'd run clean out of breath during a decent conversation.

"On my list."

Brandon Rock had a Mustang that misfired so bad half the street called it in the first time it happened. It was becoming a nuisance.

"I heard about her. Star. Again." Milton dabbed sweat from his head with the bloody cloth. Rumor had it he ate nothing but meat, and it was taking a toll.

"She's alright. Sick, this time she was just sick."

"I saw it all. Damn shame . . . with those children."

Milton lived directly across from Star. He took the kind of interest in her and the kids that spoke more of a lonely life than the dwindling Neighborhood Watch group the man commanded.

“You always see it all, Milton. Maybe you should’ve been a cop.”

Milton waved a hand. “I got enough on with the Watch. 10-51 the other night.”

“Wrecker needed.”

Milton used police codes liberally, and badly.

“She’s lucky she’s got you looking out for her.” Milton pulled a toothpick from his pocket and got to work on a piece of flesh lodged between his two front teeth. “I was thinking of Vincent King. Is it today? People said it’s today.”

“It is.” Walk bent, picked up a soda can and dropped it into the trash, the sun warm on his neck.

Milton whistled. “Thirty years, Walk.”

It would’ve been ten, worst case ten, but for a fight inside. Walk didn’t ever get the full report, just knew his childhood friend had two deaths on his hands. Ten years became thirty, manslaughter became murder, a boy became a man.

“I still think about that day. Us walking the woodland. So, he is coming back to the Cape?”

“Far as I know.”

“You can send him here, if he needs anything. Actually, tell you what, Walk. How about I put a couple trotters aside for him. How does that sound?”

Walk searched for the words.

“So.” Milton cleared his throat and looked down at the ground. “The sky tonight . . . supermoon. It’ll be a sight, and

I just got myself a new Celestron. I mean, I need to set things up, but if you wanted to stop by—”

“I’ve got something on. Another time?”

“Sure. But come here after your shift, I can give you the neck.” Milton nodded toward the deer.

“Please, God, no.” Walk backed away, then patted his stomach. “I need to lose—”

“Don’t worry, it’s lean. If you stew it right it’s a decent cut. I’d offer up the heart but once I get a sear on it that flavor just sings.”

Walk closed his eyes, the nausea creeping up. His hands shook. Milton noticed, looked like he wanted to say something more so Walk moved on fast.

He saw no one around so popped a couple of pills. He was acutely and painfully aware of his dependency.

He moved past cafés and storefronts, said hello to a few, helped Mrs. Astor load grocery bags into her car, listened as Felix Coke bent his ear about the traffic on Fullerton.

He stopped by Brant’s Delicatessen, rows of pastries and cheeses filled the window.

“Hey, Chief Walker.”

Alice Owen, hair pulled back and a full face of makeup despite the workout clothes. She carried some kind of miniature cross so skinny Walk counted off its ribs as it trembled. He reached forward to pet it and watched the teeth bare.

“Would you mind holding on to Lady while I pick something up? I’ll just be a second.”

“Sure.” He reached for the leash.

“Oh, you can’t put her down. She’s just been clipped and her nails are tender.”

“The claws?”

Alice thrust the dog into his arms and headed inside.

He watched through the window as she placed an order then stopped and talked with another vacationer. Ten minutes passed, the dog panting into his face.

When Alice finally made it back she was laden with bags so he carried the dog over to her SUV and waited while she loaded it. She thanked him, then reached into a paper bag and handed him a cannoli. He made a fuss of trying not to take it, then waited till he was clear of Main before eating it down in two bites.

He walked along Cassidy then cut through onto Ivy Ranch Road. At Star's place he stood on the porch a while, listening to the music play inside.

Star opened the door before he could knock, met him with the kind of smile that kept him from giving up on her. Hollowed out but beautiful, beaten down but her eyes still shone. She wore a pink apron like she'd been baking. Walk knew the cupboards were bare.

"Good afternoon, Chief Walker."

In spite of himself he couldn't help the smile.

There was a fan moving slow, drywall bare in spots, drapes pulled from their rings like Star couldn't close out the day quick enough. The radio played loud, Skynyrd sang about Alabama as Star danced her way through the kitchen, loading a garbage bag with empty beers bottles and packs of Lucky Strike. She grinned at him, looking like a kid as she did. She still had that way, vulnerable, troubled and trouble.

She spun once, then tossed a foil ashtray into the sack.

Above the fireplace was a photo, the two of them, fourteen, ready and waiting for the future to come at them.

“How’s your head?”

“Never better. I’m thinking clear now, Walk. Thanks and all . . . last night. But I think maybe I needed it, you know. One last time. Now I’m seeing right.” She tapped her head, then moved on, still dancing. “The kids, they didn’t see nothing, right?”

“Are we going to talk about it, today?”

As the music faded out she finally stopped moving, wiped the sweat from her head and tied her hair back. “It’ll come and it’ll go. Does Duchess know?”

Star asking him about her own daughter.

“The whole town knows.”

“You think he’s changed?”

“We all have.”

“Not you, Walk.” She aimed for admiration but all he heard was disdain.

He hadn’t seen Vincent in five years, though he’d tried often. The visits were close at first, he’d ride with Gracie King in the old Regal. It had been cold and hard, the judge sending a fifteen-year-old boy to a men’s prison. Star’s father took the stand, told of Sissy, of the kind of girl she was becoming. They showed photos of the scene, little legs, blood on a small hand. They called in Principal Hutch, and he told about the kind of boy Vincent was. Trouble.

And then it was Walk’s turn, and his father had looked on, brown shirt, honest face. He was foreman at Tallow Construction, they had a factory that smoked away dreams two towns over. That same summer Walk had gone with him, for orientation. He’d stood in coveralls and watched, all the grays, the pipes and scaffold so intricate like bowels, a cathedral of metals.

In that courtroom Walk met his father's proud gaze and offered up the kind of unabridged truth that sealed his friend's fate.

"I don't need to be looking back anymore," Star said.

He made coffee. They took it out to the deck, birds on the swing-set flapping lazy and high when Walk settled into an old chair.

She fanned her face. "You going to get him?"

"He said not to. I wrote him."

"But you'll go anyway."

"I will."

"Don't tell him . . . about me and all." Her knee bounced, she tapped the chair with her finger. All energy before the real purge came.

"He'll ask."

"I don't want him here. I don't think I can, in my house."

"Okay."

She lit a cigarette and closed her eyes.

"So, there's a program, a new one, over in—"

"Save it." She held up a hand. "I told you. It's behind me now."

They'd tried counseling, Walk had driven her to Blair Peak each month for a lifetime, the shrink seemed to get through, progress had been good. Walk would drop her, leave her and head to a diner to wait. Three hours, sometimes more before she called. Some days the kids would ride the hours with them, silent in the back, looking on as their innocence trailed the cruiser, slipping further behind.

"It can't . . . this can't go on."

"Still popping pills, Walk?"

He wanted to tell her it was different, but then he wondered

how. They were the afflicted. Plain and simple.

She reached over and squeezed his hand, no harm meant.

“I think you’ve got cream on your shirt.”

He glanced down and she laughed.

“Look at us. You know, sometimes I still feel it.”

“What?”

“Fifteen, baby.”

“We’re getting old.”

She blew a perfect smoke ring. “Not me, Walk. You’re getting older and me, I’m just getting started.”

He laughed hard, and then she laughed too. And that was them, Walk and Star, thirty years unwinding till all that was left was a couple of kids talking shit and making jokes.

They passed another hour in easy silence, neither saying it but both knowing there was only one thing on their minds. Vincent King was coming home.