

SAMPLE PAGES:

Chapter 3: Out West

Jillian's shoes left a string of dust puffs as she lightly jogged on the old county road. The setting sun was drawing the first cool evening breeze around her, and she was happy to be away from the city, out here in the open spaces of the high plains. She topped a low hill that overlooked a small valley, and she saw the rambling white stucco ranch house nestled in the lengthening shadows. This was home, now.

Far above, in the deepening rose and violet colored sky, Venus gleamed like a jewel. There would always be a link, if only in memory, she thought. The exercise and the stillness of the evening helped to clear her mind, to cleanse her of the confusion of moving and settling in, adapting to a new style of life. She coveted her time alone.

A movement in the brush ahead of her made her slow her pace. She continued cautiously. Previously on her first jog she had stumbled over a flat rattlesnake, and it had frightened her. Fortunately for her it was dead, the hapless victim of a passing farm truck. Still, she was shocked enough to be more wary on subsequent outings. She jogged on around a curve and caught sight of a form that brought her up short. It was a coyote.

It sat square in the middle of the road, panting and grinning at her. It had either been chasing something or was being chased, as so it goes for wildlife. It licked its chops and Jillian was sure it looked hungry. They studied each other curiously and warily. Jillian decided to keep at a safe distance, she being unfamiliar with wild animals. She felt a strong urge to be away from here. She considered wading through the scratchy sagebrush around it, or scaring it away. She moved slowly closer to the animal. Then she saw how thin it was. Existing on these semi-arid plains was difficult for wild creatures, even in the best of times.

Now, the worst drought in memory pressured even the most resourceful living things, be they coyotes or humans. Jillian felt a wave of pity for the coyote. The poor thing looked exhausted. She wished that she could do something for it. It gave her a long look, then pointed its nose up to the twilight and howled. The sound sent a shiver racing up Jillian's spine, and she froze. She shut her eyes tightly as the coyote's cry echoed over the valley. She wished that her uncle was here. He always knew what to do.

The howling stopped. Jillian slowly opened her eyes and looked around. The coyote had silently disappeared. Jillian wiped a trickle of perspiration from her forehead and carefully at first, then faster, ran home. She went straight to the old wooden shed where Robert Deems was working, and pulled the door open on its creaky hinges.

"Who's there?" said a voice from somewhere near the floor.

"Just me, Uncle Bob," Jillian replied breathlessly. "Guess what I saw!"

"I couldn't guess," he said. Jillian left the door open and crossed the room to where her uncle's legs stuck out from beneath a large cylindrical object.

She caught her breath. "I saw a coyote."

Deems struggled out from under the object, immediately concerned. Sometimes, she accused him of

being overly protective. She did not accuse him now, though. She wanted his warm hug of caring. He rose and put one arm around her and wiped dirt off of his coveralls with the other. He looked more like a garage mechanic than an aeronautical engineer.

"Are you okay?" he asked. Jillian nodded. "I've told you not to jog so late in the afternoon."

"Yes, I know, I'm fine. It just howled at me and ran off. I didn't know what to do!"

Deems sat her down on a shipping crate. He looked out the door thoughtfully for a moment, then began to clean his chronically smudged eyeglasses. "You have to be very careful, Jillian," he said.

"We ex-urbanites can have serious problems out here in the country. We don't have adequate knowledge to deal with wild animals or natural threats."

"I'm understanding that better every day," Jillian agreed.

Deems sighed. "This adjustment has been most difficult, for you, I'm sure."

"For you, too."

"Well, at least I have this project to keep me busy. But what is there for you? I still think you should have stayed on at the Department."

"No, Uncle, you know I couldn't stay, after the way they treated you. And I don't want to argue about it."

"I'm just concerned about you."

Jillian smiled and patted her uncle on the shoulder. "I know, and I love you for that."

"Thanks. Now, I've got to get back to work. Would you mind shutting the door?"

"But it's baking hot in here!"

"Be that as it may, it needs to be closed while I run some tests."

"What kind of tests?"

Deems had grabbed an instrument and was resuming his work beneath the object. "I'm checking the thermocouples," he grunted.

"Be careful. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not really. There's not much room down here."

Jillian looked around the room which was mostly occupied with now empty shipping crates and the object. The only illumination was afforded by a single bare light bulb that hung from the ceiling. It cast a yellowish light on the old gray wood and the dirt floor.

"Uncle Bob," she said, "If you don't cool off you're liable to get heatstroke."

"That has occurred to me," came his muffled voice. "This shouldn't take much longer, though."

"I've heard that before," she chided. "I know you, though. Once you start something, you won't stop until you're done."

"Or I'm dragged, kicking and screaming, away from it. I know. Now please close the door." He made a slight adjustment with the instrument. Jillian started toward the door. She would close it, and she had no intention of staying in this sweat box.

"How about a cold glass of water?" she called back.

"Sounds good," came his muffled reply.

"Good. I'll be right back. I hope you'll be finished by then."

"What?" said Deems, but she was gone.

Jillian walked along the dusty path to the house. Far to the east the distant dry heat lightning flashed in the darkening sky, reminding of bygone rain showers. She passed the buzzing yard light where flying insects congregated to be zapped senseless every summer night. She glanced up at Venus hanging brightly in the western heavens as she swung open the back screen door and stepped into the dark house. She thought of the lonely coyote and how Robert Deems' situation was somehow the same. Ever since their arrival here, she had often found him gazing at the sky, hungry for the knowledge to be attained, thirsty for the satisfaction that had been realized in his life's work. It made her sad, to see him so outcast.

She snapped the kitchen light on, went to the old porcelain sink and washed off some of the dust accumulated on her run. She used the cool water sparingly, conscious of the low supply of well water.

It seemed that the drought, which had begun two years before they moved in, had developed into the longest, driest period since anyone had kept records in this region. No one knew exactly why no rain came, although theories she had heard discussed included cyclical widespread weather phenomena, sunspots, and the effects of pollution, or the generic villain of climate change. Jillian meant simply to deal with it, as well as possible.

She patted her face partly dry, letting the remaining water evaporate and cool her skin. She took two clean glasses down from the shelf. "Now please close the door." He made a slight adjustment with the instrument. Jillian started toward the door. She would close it, and she had no intention of staying in this sweat box.