

Running Cold

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Tales From Zell, Inc. TM

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Chapter 1

Stepping on the Vine

It's a game of hide-and-peek, but Michael doesn't want to play.

It's a game Nicky always starts, and Nicky doesn't play it like other kids. With Nicky, "hide-and-peek" isn't over when you're found. And Nicky only plays when Mommy and Daddy are gone.

The house is big and there are lots of places to hide, but Nicky knows them all. Nicky is patient. He takes his time, checks out every one.

It's dark and tight where Michael hides. His cramped lungs suck tiny breaths filled with turpentine and the stench of pet droppings.

There are few basements in Phoenix, Arizona, but the Helm house has one. There's a tool closet in one corner but Daddy doesn't have time to build anything so it only holds Michael's paintbrushes, canvas, and bags of feed for all his pets.

The unused saw-table is home to the pets that can't stay outside.

Guinea pigs, painted turtles, chameleons and blue-bellied lizards, and Michael's favorite - Long John, his African Gray parrot. His pets are active now, skittering under shredded newsprint and leaves in their boxes; struggling against their tiny prison bars to look out.

Beneath the saw-table is a cabinet with all the shelves removed.

That's where Michael hides, knees crushing his lungs.

Wings flap just over Michael's head. The illusion of night the hooded cage affords broken now, by the rustling of the others. Long John, has woken. Michael can hear Long John's scaly feet grasp and slide over the wooden perch, the scissoring of his powerful beak. Long-John's a talker, but an anxious, "click – click – click," is all he's saying now.

Between the clicks...footsteps. Slow, deliberate footsteps that could be coming from anywhere.

It doesn't matter how well Michael hides. Nicky will find him; Nicky always does.

Something wet splashes his leg –

“Michael!”

“Michael, does any of this look familiar?”

Fog gives way to watercolor dunes, waves of green, tans and gray...

From the radio someone sang about having pieces of something, or someone...*Pieces of April?* What could *that* mean? Michael's sleep had been fitful, his dreams were all bad, and the song just didn't make sense.

Mom switched the radio off.

Michael was in the car with his Mom now, not under the saw-table. The basement in Phoenix was a few hundred miles of sand dunes and bleak desert highway behind them. He was free, *safe*.

He rubbed another splash of cold water from his knee.

The icy drip was courtesy the refrigeration unit slung beneath the dashboard. Condensation on the grill dripped so bad sometimes you had to sit with your knees pressed to the door. Doze for a moment – let your guard down even a little – and the ice water got you.

Despite the bum refrigeration unit, the car was almost new – a 1964, sky-blue Plymouth Fury complete with push-button transmission. The

Helms had other cars, bigger ones – Dad made lots of money. But this was Dad’s favorite – he liked the push-buttons, said they made him feel like he was driving an “Auto-Mat.” Dad use to take time off to be with the family, and they’d go on long drives together. Sometimes, Dad even let Michael push the buttons to shift. But Dad would never be with them again.

“Nice houses up there, huh?”

Mom darted her chin toward a hill dappled with gray ice plant then snapped her focus quickly back to the road ahead, a white-knuckle grip on the wheel. Push-buttons or not, to Michael it often seemed the Fury drove *her*.

With the low fog, the hill she’d pointed seemed to be riding atop clouds. The houses winding up its slope got bigger as they reached the apex, giving the hillside a sort of top-heavy look. To Michael, it was like a Dr. Seuss story he’d read – one about a king turtle named Yertle, who stacked every other turtle in his kingdom below him so he could have the best view in the kingdom. The whole stack of turtles eventually fell over. Michael couldn’t recall if Yertle died in the fall. He guessed there were a lot of nasty injuries though. Even turtle shells broke if they fell on a rock or -

“Yeah,” mom sighed, “That’s the ‘cat-bird seat’ up there all right.”

The biggest house, and the highest on the hill ahead, looked a lot like the one they’d just left in Phoenix.

Michael figured what a cat-bird might look like – but it seemed like a weird thing, and why the heck would it have a big house all its own and just sit there? He didn’t care. He frowned at the big house that wasn’t theirs.

The houses they passed now were on a hill too, but a much smaller one. Their neighborhood in Phoenix had been on a mountain.

Not many kids lived here – he could see that right off as Mom threaded their car carefully up the narrow roads – no bikes leaned in the driveways – if you could call the weedy stretches of sand in front of the houses “driveways.” No basketball hoops over the carports. In fact, there weren’t any carports. The cars were either hidden in ugly stucco garages, or left stranded like dead whales in the sand.

The Fury nosed up a hill so steep all he could see were clouds.

“Do you remember any of this?” Mom re-phrased.

Sure he did. It was nowhere he wanted to be.

“Turn right. Go up the hill.”

“It’s something, isn’t it? The way you remember things...”

It sounded like she wanted to say more, but she didn't. Mom talked that way a lot – half of things. Michael wasn't sure if she just figured he knew what she was going to say -- or if she was just too tired to go on.

Mom was tired a lot.

He'd spent sixth and seventh grade at Saint Thomas the Apostle back in Phoenix. He hadn't liked Saint Thomas so much, but he'd been there two whole school years and gotten used to it. "Two school years" was a record for Michael. Before that, it was Saint Agnes. Saint Gregory before that. The list went on. In many ways, life had gotten easier since his older brother, Nicky, died. In just as many ways, it hadn't.

Here in LaVista he'd be the "new kid" all over again.

"Well," Mom smiled, but her voice wasn't happy. "We're here."

Granma Helm's bungalow leaned into a sand dune. It wasn't much of a house, but now it was theirs. Dad's parents had moved to California when dad went away to Arizona for college. Dad said the California house was one of a jillion beach bungalows built by the studios way back in the Golden Age of movies when Hollywood was "really cranking them out" and "spending like there was no tomorrow" which, apparently, there hadn't been. *Bungalow* was a big word for something the size of a shoe box. Dad said shacks like this weren't supposed to be anything more than temporary housing for grips and extras. Dad said grips and extras were people who worked on films but weren't stars.

"Let's hope the movers are on time," Mom sighed.

The front door opened with a cloud of dust rank with mildew and the ghosts of cigarettes from long ago. Oppressive smells you could almost feel, like a greasy hand pressed over your face. Gramps Helm was a chain-smoker till the day he died. At least that's what Mom said. Once the old man died,

Gram picked right up where he'd left off, apparently forging a chain around her lungs Jacob Marley would have been proud of.

"*God,*" Mom grimaced, trying to wave away the bad air with one hand, pressing her chest with the other. For a moment, he thought she might actually retch. "We'll have to do something about that right away."

Mom rolled up shades and cranked open windows the second they stepped inside, and Michael did the same. The light that spilled in was yellow and thick with motes.

"Get started with the bags in the trunk. I'll see if she left any cleanser."

She handed Michael the keys to the Fury, and for a few seconds as he stood holding the cool metal bits in his hands, he mapped the way back to Phoenix in his head.

There was a curse on kids in Southern California. At least, that's how Sandy Randall saw it. The haze hadn't left their beach all day and the water was cold. Tom and Pete were fine with it – but Sandy was freezing.

Summer can be weird in Southern California. It's sunny, and the ocean screams, "jump in!" every morning until school lets out end of May.

In June, when you're finally free, the sun hides and the beach goes cold. They call it "June gloom" and it's cruel.

The three of them carried the long board together, Tom and Pete switching off front and back, Sandy in the middle. The middle was easy, mostly just balancing it. The boys were doing all the work. Tom had insisted that's how it should be since Sandy was a girl and, for once, Sandy didn't argue.

At five foot two, she was taller than Pete, though she was much shorter than Tom now. Tom had taken a growth spurt over the school year and passed her by. The last time they'd wrestled, she'd pinned him. That was a summer ago, before the spurt, and she guessed things would probably be different today.

A Beach Boys song called *In My Room* was cutting in and out of the black transistor radio that hung from a strap on Pete's wrist. The radio had swallowed enough seawater and sand over the years that it played more static than music these days. You could still make out most of the words though.

The song was melancholy, about having a special place of your own where you could dream and be yourself. The song made her feel worse.

They'd stayed too long at the beach. A few hours ago, she'd almost walked home by herself, but she hadn't. Walking back wasn't a big deal in itself; none of them lived more than a mile from the beach. But every summer's day since first grade they'd walked home from the beach, the

Cove Theater, or wherever they'd spent their day, together.

Today she'd nearly ended that streak.

She felt gritty, salty, and worn-out. Mostly she was just uncomfortable. Sandy had been the recipient of a growth spurt of her own this winter. Unfortunately, it hadn't made her taller. Her favorite bikini and shorts were stretched to the limit these days. Boys were gawking. Every now and then even Tom would sneak sideways glances at her. At first, she'd thought that was creepy. Now, she mostly ignored it.

Sandy smirked, watching the funny tire-tread marks Tom's Huarache sandals left. Sandy was barefoot, as always. She hated shoes. Tom and Pete had tossed in their blue and white Baggies for these new, insanely bright, trunks called "Jams" with "tropical" patterns. They were supposed to look cool. They looked like dweebs.

"Rocky, come on."

"What?"

"Man you are *way out*."

The static on Pete's radio was annoying now -- so was her latest nickname, *Rocky*. Over the course of their friendship she'd been Dusty, Sunny, Salty, and now Rocky -- anything but Sandy.

“Ditch the board first? Or hit Big Jerry’s now?” Tom asked.

“Big Jerry’s--Big Jerry’s--Big Jerry’s --” Pete lobbied.

Big Jerry’s was the market on La Playa. It wasn’t much of a market; soft drinks and candy, mostly -- a freezer full of Drumsticks and Popsicles.

The owner, “Big Jerry” Duttman was a beach boy from way back – even before Mike Love and the Brothers Wilson were born. He was cool. You could get a Doctor Pepper on credit at Big Jerry’s.

But going there meant crossing PCH way over on the north side of the backwater, not the south side where they lived, and that meant carrying the surfboard a good mile more than they needed to. That was stupid.

“Take it back,” she said, “we’re practically there.”

“Big Jerry’s!” Pete whined.

“That’s nuts,” she said. “We can ditch it at your house and hit Big Jerry’s after.”

Tom considered both prospects, tongue thoughtfully working his cheek, right about where a patch of practically transparent hairs had recently sprouted. Was he ever going to yank those out?

“I’m with Pete,” Tom said, finally.

She gave the board a shove, nearly toppling the boys.

“Fine, go with Pete.”

“Rocky, come on --”

She whirled on Tom so fast he nearly dropped his end of the board.

“*Sandy!*” she spat. “My name is Sandy!”

“Geez. Rock...Sandy,” Tom’s mouth hung slack. He stood there, skinny as a pole, so gawky in his Jams. His Adam’s apple yo-yo’d. That sudden spurt had simply stretched him out, not added to him – except for those daddy long-legs popping out of his cheeks and chin - his neck resembled a pelican’s right now. “I didn’t mean -- I, uh...”

The boys exchanged a glance then shook their heads. Sandy spun the other way, her face suddenly hot. That heading unfortunately started her in the direction of Big Jerry’s market, not her house, but she kept on walking just the same.

The two boys stood right where she’d left them for a moment or two, not sure what to do next. Finally, they followed at a respectful distance.

After a short time, the respect left.

“Such a baby,” she heard Pete say, finally.

“You’re a whiner,” she spat over her shoulder.

“Baby.”

“Whiner.”

“Baby.”

“Shut up,” Tom said.

“But she *IS* --”

“Shut it!”

“What’re you telling me to shut up for?”

Tom frowned and shook his head, “Just do it.”



The movers had come and Mom knew where everything was supposed to go. Michael was just in the way.

For a while, he stood to the side, watched the parade of boxes as long as that seemed interesting. Eventually, he drifted outside and down the block to the next road, and the next one after that. Before long he was at the bottom of the hill, where the main road ran into another one and died.

Looking back where the moving truck leaned, its black tongue lolling out onto the dirt, he noted the order of things. *Their* house was the pinkish one with the gray roof just past an open lot – the hull of an old truck sat rusting in the middle of that lot, being eaten alive by vines with leaves big as he was. There were three other houses between the empty lot and the end of their block. Every house on the hill sat catawampus in the sand like they'd dropped there from the sky. Nothing looked planned at all.

So different from the perfectly gridded Valley of the Sun, Phoenix, Arizona, where every lawn was framed by irrigation “berms” and sidewalks, with exactly two palm trees and two mulberries to a lot. In Phoenix, even the houses with no lawns and just desert outside were landscaped, often bordered by rows of organ-pipe or prickly pear, maybe a couple carefully placed agaves thrown in for accents.

Michael crossed the road to a weathered wood fence that protected a wide riverbed. He leaned there, dejected, arms hooked over the crossbar, chin in his hands. The riverbed was mostly sand, big surprise there, some tall grass, and tumbleweeds. Blue-gray ice plant took over from the grass and weeds halfway across. The ice plant had managed a sprinkling of red flowers, enough to make the riverbed look like some giant with a bloody nose had run across it. On the other bank, the ice plant died away to ropy, gray knots that stretched up a yellow cliff to more houses. Much nicer houses than theirs.

A tall bridge off to his right carried the highway that brought them here. Beneath it, the sand and brush blended quickly to reeds and water.

Beyond that was the one cool thing they'd gained by moving here -- the ocean. And that could lift the spirits of any boy.

The fog had broken enough to give Michael his first, awestruck, glimpse of surf since way before Nicky got killed and Dad went away, and he stared at that wonder beneath the bridge for a long time.

Whucck!

Cold, wet goo splattered his face, yanked him from his reverie. He slipped off the fence, and landed squarely on his butt in the sand. At his feet, a clam oozed quivering, salmon-colored meat into the sand. The crossbar where he'd been leaning held a ragged, pink slash, dotted with bits of black shell.

A mottled and dingy white seagull shrieked as it circled high overhead.

Michael jumped to his feet, swiped the slimy globs off his cheek; a mixture of anger and disgust in his gut.

The gull banked, then dropped sharply, landing heavy and loud on the fence just a few feet from Michael. The gnarled wood creaked beneath its odd feet. It was the biggest, scariest bird Michael had ever seen. The gull turned an evil yellow eye toward him and shrieked again -- louder than before.

Michael stepped over the gore at his feet.

"It's not my fault you threw your lunch at me!" A gust of wind threw sand into the air.

It was an old bird, Michael figured, weathered as a crusty, old pirate, with chips of gray enamel flecking the edges of its worn beak. It worked that beak like it wanted to say, “back-off kid, or the next clam lands on your skull.” Shoulders hunched, it sidled along the fence toward him. Michael couldn’t take his eyes off the creature.

But he wasn’t backing down either.

“You threw it right at me -!” He scolded, even adding a word Mom would have washed out of his mouth with soap had she heard.

The gull flapped its wings angrily, glanced at the foamy meat in the sand, guarded now by Michael’s deck shoes. It turned accusingly back to Michael with a shriek so loud it skinned Michael’s teeth.

Walk away, a dim voice inside Michael said.

Just walk on home and let the grizzled old fart finish its stupid lunch.

But Michael had already lost his home, his school, his whole life today. He wasn’t taking diddly-squat from a stupid bird.

“You don’t scare me. You don’t win the game.”

He had been scared, yes, Michael had, and this wasn’t the first time, not by a long shot.

Nothin’ but a little scaredy-cat. Little crybaby!

“That’s what you think, isn’t it?”

I win again, Mikey! What are ya' gonna do about it, baby Mikey? You gonna cry some more?

The gull hunched its shoulders, flicked its wings - eyes narrowing, head bobbing and darting, sizing up Michael from every angle. It was ready now, ready to take what was rightfully its own whether Michael backed off or not.

But Michael had no intention of backing off.

“I’ll show *you*. I’ll show you – that’s what I’ll do!”

A cool breeze sent the tall grass waving along the ravine. Michael closed his eyes, felt the breeze gently wrap around him. A breath of it sank deep into his lungs. A familiar tingling in his toes and fingers, the cold had come, and once it had taken a sure hold there, sucked back through him like ice water through a straw. The orbs rolled back beneath his lids, ticked left and right, as if they too were searching for the word, for just the right word.

What was it? What would fit? Something Mom had said.

Blackness. The hiss of fang's suddenly bared.

Found it.

Michael’s eyes rolled forward again, the lids opened.

On a breath that could have frozen white as it left his lips, he whispered,

“Cat-bird.”

The gull's head flicked back. It slapped the weathered fence pole with the side of its beak, as if dislodging some unseen sludge. Then that ugly beak opened wide, but the shriek didn't come this time; couldn't come. Michael saw a tongue within, spotted gray and pink. The gull's yellow eyes seemed the size of boulder marbles now.

And then the seagull was gone. What stood gasping in its place made Michael swallow hard, his own eyes wide now. The cold had drained away, in its place, a hollowness, a *horror* -

“It’s not my fault!” he shouted.

His knees buckled – if only to remind him he still had legs. Legs ready to run, *to run like hell*.

He screamed, whirled away, pounding the sand with each step as he raced his fear up the hill.

“It’s not my fault!”

He shivered when he reached the house, that familiar tingle racing over him again. The sight of his own, blue-tinged fingertips, made him catch his breath. He forced himself to breathe. The feeling would pass, sure it would.

Nothing had happened. *Nothing real anyway*.

And it wasn't his fault even if it had.

He jammed his hands deep in his jean pockets before he walked inside.

The movers were finishing up. Only boxes remained.

The bits of their old life too large to be packed – china cabinet, cherry wood dinner table, and the leather sofa from dad’s study -- were already inside, looking as out of place within these cigarette-stained walls as Michael felt.

The stale odors were still there, cut now by the sting of cleaning fluids in the air. When he swallowed, the taste was a mixed bag of *Pine sol*, bleach, and cigarette butts.

So much old stuff in this house. A lot of nautical crud: hurricane lamps, cork floats, pictures framed with porthole covers. On the mantle sat the main two things he really remembered from their trip out for Grandpa Helm’s funeral – a big ugly egg-shaped piece of rock and the odd combination clock and barometer thing set in what looked to be the steering wheel from the world’s tiniest schooner.

Everything else was unfamiliar, and all was caked with dust and mold. Mom had already removed a couple pictures from the wall, ghost frames of smoke and dust remained in their place.

The grunts, small talk and the odor of beer-filled sweat added by the moving men didn't help matters.

He wished the movers would just finish already and leave. The den and living room were already piled high. So much had been left in Phoenix; there couldn’t be that much more to go.

When he passed a wall of boxes he saw one mover who wasn't actually moving anything. The man's overalls were a patchwork of oil stained denim, a few strands of yellow-white threads left to hide his grimy knees. A cross tattooed on one arm looked like it had been scraped into his warty skin with a melted blue crayon. The cigarette dangling from his hand spiraled gray smoke between fingers browned with nicotine.

The man seemed fascinated with the label on one of the boxes piled in front of him, even though it only said Del Monte Baked Beans – and that wasn't even what was inside.

Then Michael saw what the mover was *really* looking at.

In the kitchen, Michael's mom was scrubbing black shoe scuffs off the linoleum next to the fridge. She wore shorts that were probably too tight for housework, and one of Dad's work shirts that wasn't nearly tight enough.

That's where the mover's eyes were.

The man straightened when he noticed Michael, gave Michael a stupid, yellow grin, then went right back to staring at her, only now he plunked the cigarette in one corner of his mouth and actually picked up the Del Monte box.

“Mom?”

“Honey?”

She stood. The man set the box down not two feet from where it had been, and walked outside.

“I don't like that guy.”

“What’s wrong, my little man?”

“I just don’t like him.”

She dismissed Michael’s concern with a shrug, but her hands automatically went to Dad’s shirt and fastened one more button.

“Well, it’s not like we’ll ever see them again.” But when she rubbed his forehead, she did look concerned.

“Mikey, *are you all right?*”

“Uh huh.” He shoved his hands deeper in his pockets.

“You’ve been *so good*. It’s been a long day and you’ve been real good the whole way here. I saw a market on the way up. We’ll get some ice cream, okay?”