Red Moon

A Novel

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For Lisa, the chief
and
For my mother

I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace.

—ALBERT CAMUS, *THE PLAGUE*

And I lost the taste for judging right from wrong
For my flesh had turned to fur
Yeah, and my thoughts they surely were
Turned to instinct and obedience to God

—BLITZEN TRAPPER, "FURR"

CHAPTER 1

HE CANNOT SLEEP. All night, even with his eyes closed, Patrick Gamble can see the red numbers of the clock as they click forward: 2:00, 3:30, 4:10, now 4:30, but he is up before the alarm can blare. He snaps on the light and pulls on the blue jeans and black T-shirt folded in a pile, ready for him, ready for this moment, the one he has been dreading for the past two months. His suitcase yawns open on the floor. He tosses his toiletry kit into it after staggering down the hall to the bathroom and rubbing his armpits with a deodorant stick and brushing his teeth, foaming his mouth full of mint toothpaste.

He stands over the suitcase, waiting, as if hoping hard enough would make his hopes come true, waiting until his raised hopes fall, waiting until he senses his father in the bedroom doorway, turning to look at him when he says, "It's time."

He will not cry. His father has taught him that, not to cry, and if he has to, he has to hide it. He zips the suitcase shut and drags it upright and stares at himself in the closet mirror—his jaw stubbled with a few days' worth of whiskers, his eyes so purple with sleeplessness they look like flowers that have wilted in on themselves—before heading down the hall to the living room, where his father is waiting for him.

The truck idles in the driveway. The air smells like pine and exhaust. Sunlight has started to creep into the night sky, but only a faint glow, a false dawn. The suitcase chews its wheels through the gravel and Patrick struggles two-handed with its weight. When his father tries to help him, Patrick says, "Don't," and heaves it up into the bed of the truck.

"Sorry," his father says, and the word hangs in the air until Patrick slams shut the tailgate. They climb into the truck and on the

bench seat Patrick finds a peanut butter toast sandwich wrapped in a paper towel, but his stomach feels like a bruised fist and he can't imagine choking down more than a bite.

They follow the long gravel drive with their headlights casting twisting shadows through the tunnel of trees. They are alone on a county road, and then surrounded by traffic on I-580, heading south, toward San Francisco. Half the sky full of stars, the rest of it blurred by soot-black clouds occasionally pulsing with gold-wire lightning.

His father says he hopes the weather clears, hopes his flight goes off without a hitch, and Patrick says, yes, he hopes so too.

"You've got Neal's number?"

"Yeah."

"In case things get weird with your mother?"

"Yeah."

"Not that I think they will, but in case they do, he's a three-hour drive away."

"I know."

The sky lightens to a plum color—and with the sun and the stars and the clouds at war in the sky, Patrick can't help but think that's how things are around here, divided, like the landscape, ocean and forest and desert and city, clouds and sun and fog, like so many worlds crushed into one.

It is another half hour before the sun crests the horizon and injures his eyes to look at. His father holds the steering wheel like it isn't going where he wants it to go unless he muscles it hard. The two of them say nothing because there is nothing to say. It has all been said. Patrick does not want to go, but that is irrelevant given the fact that he must. That goes for them both. They must.

The sky is clotted with clouds. Rain spits. Seagulls screech. The bay is walled off by fog. In the near distance the brown hills are only a hazy presence and the noise of traffic is only a vague growl as

cars pour off the freeway and follow narrower roads that branch into parking ramps, rental lots, terminals. One of them, a black sedan with a silver grille, dips underground to the arrivals area at San Francisco International Airport, but it does not stop where the other cars stop, does not pull up to the curb and pop its trunk and click on its hazard lights. Instead it slides past the rest of the traffic, around the corner, to the bend in the road bordered by concrete walls, where it slows enough for the door to open and a man with a briefcase to step out and walk away without a parting word or backward glance.

He is smiling slightly when a minute later he walks beneath the sign that reads TERMINAL. He appears to be a businessman on his way to close a deal. He has the black leather briefcase with the silver snaps. The Nunn Bush wing tips shined to an opal glow. The neatly pressed charcoal suit, starched white shirt, and red tie running down his chest. His hair is severely parted to one side and dusted with gray, the gel darkening it to the color of coal. He looks like hundreds of other men in the airport this morning. His face could be anyone's face.

But if you looked closer, you might note his pallid cheeks, his neck rashed and jeweled with scabs—where once there was a beard, razored away the night before. You might spot his white-knuckled grip on the briefcase. The redness vining the corners of his eyes after a sleepless night. And his clenched jaw, the muscles balled and jumping.

This is the busiest time of day, when the security guards, the flight attendants, his fellow travelers, notice the least, the airport a flurry of bodies, a carnival of noise. The motion detector above the entrance winks and the electronic double doors open and he enters baggage claim. Here is a gaggle of Japanese tourists wearing neon-green tracksuits. An obese man spilling out of his wheelchair. An exhausted-looking couple dragging behind them red-faced children and overstuffed backpacks. An old man in a gray Windbreaker and Velcro shoes, saying, "How did that get in here?" leaning his head back and squinting up at the metal rafters, where a crow roosts.

He cuts through them all, walking up an escalator, moving past the ticket counters to security. His eyes dart wildly about him even as his body remains tense and arrows forward. He brings his hand to his breast pocket, where his boarding pass, printed up the night before, peeks out like a neatly folded handkerchief; he fingers it, as if to reassure himself that it's actually there.

The security guard has a buzz cut and fleshy body and he barely glances up when he spotlights the man's license with a blue halogen flashlight and then initials the boarding pass before handing them back. "Okay," he says, and the man says, "Thank you."

The line is long but moves fast through the maze of black ropes. When he passes through the metal detector, he closes his eyes and holds his breath. Then the guard is waving him forward, telling him, "You're good." A moment later the X-ray machine shoots out his tray and from it he collects his shoes and briefcase and wallet and silver watch, whose face he glances at when buckling it to his wrist—his flight does not board for another forty minutes.

He has not eaten this morning, his stomach an acidic twist. But the smell of fast food, of sausage and eggs, is too much for him. His hunger rolls over inside him. He orders a breakfast sandwich and paces while he waits for it. When his number is called, when he collects the bag, he rips it open and can barely find his breath as he shoves the sandwich in his mouth and gnaws it down. Then he licks the grease off the wrapper before crumpling it up to toss in the garbage. He suckles his fingertips. He wipes his hand along his thigh, unconcerned as he smears his pants with grease, and then glances around, wondering if he has caught anyone's attention. And he has. An old woman—with a dried-apple face and dandelion-fluff hair—sits in a nearby wheelchair, watching him, her mouth open and revealing a yellowed ridgeline of teeth. "You're pretty hungry," she finally says.

He finds his gate and stands by the rain-freckled window. His reflection hangs there like a ghost, and through it he observes the plane parked at the gate. Beyond it, fuel trucks and luggage carts zoom through black puddles that splash and ripple their reflection

of the world. Men wearing fluorescent orange-and-green vests over their raincoats throw luggage onto a conveyer that rises into the belly of a plane. Off in the distance, a Boeing 747 blasts down the runway like a giant bullet, steadily gaining speed, its nose lifting, the plane following, angling upward and abandoning the tarmac. And then it is gone, lost to the clouds.

He glances at his watch often. His tie is too tight. His suit is too hot. He wants to peel off his jacket but can feel his shirt sticking to his skin and knows the fabric will be spotted in places, nearly translucent along his lower back, where the sweat seems to pool. He uses his boarding pass to dab at his forehead. The ink bleeds.

The desk agent gets on the PA and lists off their flight number and destination, 373 to Portland, Oregon. Her voice is tinny and rehearsed. At this time, she says, first class is welcome to board along with premier and executive elite card carriers. He glances at his watch and checks his boarding pass for what must be the hundredth time that morning. They will depart in twenty minutes and he will board with Group 2. He wants to pace. He has to concentrate to stay footed in his place.

A few more minutes pass. He considers joining the mob of people standing next to the counter, waiting to board, but the thought of all those bodies, their heat and smell, keeps him alone by the window.

Passengers with young children and in need of extra assistance are now welcome to board. And then Group 1. And then, at last, Group 2. He hurries toward the gate but isn't sure at first where to go, who is boarding and who is waiting to board, among the confused mass of bodies and rolling suitcases. They aren't moving—they are a wall of meat—and he wants to shove them, throw something, but manages to contain himself, to steady his breathing and circle around the crowd and find the actual line of passengers shuffling toward the agent, who scans their tickets with an empty smile and a thank you, thank you, thank you.

He has not noticed up to this point the extra security detail that stands next to the jet bridge. A man and a woman, both of them

big shouldered and big bellied, bulging out of their uniforms. They are studying the line. They are waiting for him, he feels certain. And soon, any second now, they will rush forward and throw him to the floor and cuff his wrists. He is only a few feet away when they pull out of line a woman in a floppy hat and floral-patterned muumuu, apologizing to her, saying they're randomly screening passengers. "For your safety," they say.

He turns his smile on the agent when she takes his ticket. "Thank you," she says, and he says, "Thank *you*." He follows the crooked line of passengers, all of them shouldering the weight of laptops and leaning to one side, as they trudge down the throat of the jet bridge. A cold, damp wind breathes through the cracks of it. He is sweat soaked and he shudders from the chill.

"Nervous flier?" A man's voice, behind him. He is short and square, with a goatee and a matching ball cap and Windbreaker bearing the black-and-orange OSU logo.

"Little bit."

The jet bridge elbows to the left, into the open door of the plane. One of the flight attendants stands in the kitchen carrel beyond the doorway. She smiles at him, her mouth heavily lipsticked. "Welcome aboard," she says, and then he is past her, into the hush of the first-class cabin, stutter-stepping down the aisle with everyone else. Those already seated turn the pages of their newspapers in rustling snaps. The storage compartments are all open, like unhinged mouths gaping at them, waiting to swallow the diaper bags and suitcases that people hoist upward before edging into their seats.

He will not need his briefcase. There is nothing in it except some pens and a day-old newspaper. So he stores it and slips into his seat, 13A. He barely has enough time to raise the window shade and glance outside before the seat next to him shakes with the weight of the body collapsing into it. "Me again," says the man with the goatee.

He responds by snapping his buckle into place and yanking on the strap to tighten it. He looks out the window—at the puddled

asphalt, at the men heaving the last of the luggage onto the conveyor—hoping the man with the goatee won't say anything more.

But he does. "Where you headed?"

"Portland."

"Oh, sure. Same as the rest of us. I just wasn't sure if that's the end of the road or not."

"The end of the road." It is hard for him to make words, to engage in any sort of conversation, because it feels irrelevant and distracting, yes, but also because his mind feels elsewhere, twenty minutes ahead of the plane, already in the sky. "Yes."

"The Rose City." He stretches out the word *rose*. "From there?"

"No."

"Me either. I'm from Salem." He whistles a song that fades a moment later. He fingers through the airline magazine and SkyMall catalogue in the seat-back pocket. "I'm Troy, by the way."

Passengers continue to wobble down the aisle, while outside jets rise into and fall from the gray ceiling of the sky, vanishing one minute, appearing the next, like seaside birds hunting for food, their tails colored red and purple and blue, their brakes squawking along the runway.

The front door is latched shut. The air pressure tightens. His ears pop. The attendant gets on the intercom and welcomes them and fires off some information about the flight before settling into her singsong speech about seat belts and passenger safety. The man tunes out the cheery buzz of her voice. The air vents hiss. The engine grumbles. The plane retreats from the gate and then rolls forward, following a network of forty-five-degree turns until they have found their place on the tarmac and the pilot's voice barks from the loudspeakers, "Flight attendants, prepare for takeoff."

The raindrops on the window stream sideways into thin, shivering trails when the plane leaps forward, gaining speed. They roar along and eventually pull away from the ground, and at that first moment of flight, the man, despite the heaviness that presses him into his seat, feels ebullient, weightless. He looks down at the foggy expanse of the city. Right now, in their cars, along sidewalks, peo-

ple are lifting their faces to watch his plane, he thinks. Probably they are wondering where the plane is heading, who is on board, what adventures lie in store for them—and it makes him feel dizzyingly powerful to know the answer.

Troy leans toward him until their shoulders touch. "Don't worry so much. Flying's a piece of cake. I do it all the time."

The man realizes that his mouth is open, that he is breathing rapidly. He snaps his teeth together with a clack. He blinks at a shutter speed. "I'm fine."

"Here's the thing," Troy says. "Almost all plane crashes happen—I read this for a fact . . . or maybe I saw it on the TV—but almost all crashes happen when the plane is taking off and when the plane is landing. Now, we're taking off, I suppose you could say, until we've reached our cruising altitude. When that happens, the lady stewardess will say so, will say you can use your computer. And there will be a bong." He makes his hand open up like a flower when he says *bong*. "Then you know you're good. Statistically, I mean."

For the next few minutes the man stares at the clouds curling around the plane. And then a soft-toned bell sounds from above.

"There it is!" Troy says. "We're in the clear."

The flight attendant gets on the intercom again, telling them that it's now safe to use approved portable electronic devices. They will, however, be experiencing turbulence for the next half hour or so and she asks that everyone please keep their seat belts fastened and move about the cabin only if they must.

The plane is shaking. Or maybe he is shaking. He feels a lurching sensation, as if he is being thrown out of his body. His heart hammers. His breath comes in and out in quick gasps. Troy is saying something—his mouth is moving—but the man can't hear him.

His seat belt unclicks with the noise of a switchblade.

Patrick wishes he hadn't ordered the large Coke. But he was tired, and he doesn't drink coffee because it tastes like dirt, and the large

cup cost only ten cents more than the medium—so he thought, what the hell. It's been one of those mornings. A *what the hell* morning. His father is leaving his son, is leaving his job at Anchor Steam, is leaving to fight a war, his unit activated. And Patrick is leaving his father, is leaving California, his friends, his high school, leaving behind everything that defined his life, that made him *him*. Though he feels like punching through windows, torching a building, crashing a car into a brick wall, he has to stay relatively cool. He has to say *what the hell*. Because his father asked him to. "I don't want to go. And you don't want to go. But we gotta go. And it's only for twelve months," he said. "Consider it a vacation. A chance to get to know your mom a little better." Twelve months. That's how long his father's deployment would last. Patrick has to suck it up and hang tight until then.

But now he has to pee. And he has the window seat. And there is no way he can sneak past the two women sitting next to him without making them shut their laptops, making them stand, making a big production, making everybody on the plane look up and stare at him and think, "Oh, that kid has to pee." And they will be thinking that—they will be thinking about him peeing—when he locks himself into the chemical-smelling closet of a bathroom and struggles with his zipper and tries to maintain his balance, tries not to piss all over himself while turbulence shakes the plane. Maybe he can hold it. Or maybe not—it's another two hours to Portland—and the pressure is so intense his bladder is beginning to throb. Just as he is about to touch his neighbor on the wrist, to tell her excuse me, he's sorry but he has to get up, someone two rows ahead of him, a man in a charcoal suit, rises from his seat.

His face is pale and sweating. His body seems twitchy along the edges, almost as if he were humming, vibrating. His neatly combed hair is starting to come loose in gray strands that fall across his forehead. Patrick wonders if the turbulence is getting to him, if he is going to be sick. The man staggers down the aisle, yanks open the bathroom door, and slams it shut behind him.

Patrick curses under his breath. Not only does he have to wait, but he has to wait for a puker who's going leave his chunks all over the mirror and toilet and door handle. He turns around in his seat three times in as many minutes, checking the bathroom, willing the door to open. Each time he looks there is another person standing in the aisle, all of them with their arms crossed, their faces pensive, waiting. He supposes he should join them.

He unbuckles his seat belt and opens his mouth—ready to finally excuse himself, to stand—when a ragged snarl comes from the back of the cabin. It is hard to place, with the shout of the engines, the chatter of so many voices. Patrick wonders if there is something wrong with the plane. He remembers seeing a news report about how so many planes are behind on their maintenance schedules and shouldn't be in the air at all. Maybe the turbulence has shaken loose the screws holding the tail in place.

There is a growl, a long, drawn-out guttural rumbling, and though it is hard to place, it seems more animal than machine. The cabin is now hushed except for the creaking of seats as people turn around with anxious expressions.

Then the bathroom door crashes open.

A bald man in a Rose Bowl sweatshirt is the first in line for the restroom—and so he is the first to die. The door jars him back. He would have fallen except for the narrow hallway where he stands, the wall catching him and preventing any further retreat as the thing emerges from the restroom, rushing forward like a gray wraith, a blurred mass of hair and muscle and claws. It swings an arm. The bald man's scream is cut short, his throat excised and replaced by a second red mouth that he brings his hands to, as if he could hold the blood in place. But it sprays between his fingers. As if to make up for his sudden silence, the rest of the passengers begin to scream, all of their voices coming together like a siren that rises and falls.

The thing begins to move up the aisle.

Patrick is reminded of a possum his father once trapped. They live on a hobby farm north of San Francisco, near Dogtown, a half

acre of carrots and tomatoes and raspberry bushes, three goats, bee boxes, a henhouse. One night the chickens exploded into a panicked clucking, and by the time his father raced to the coop, his flashlight cutting through the dark, the whirl of feathers, he found broken eggs littering the floor and a half-dead hen in the corner missing a wing and a clump of its throat. So they set up a trap, a cage with a spring-loaded door that crashed closed. They baited it with hard-boiled eggs and old bananas. And by the next night they had their possum. It hissed and paced the length of the cage and threw itself against the bars and chewed at them with its needle teeth and reached forth a claw to rake the air. Patrick had once heard his science teacher say that animals didn't feel the same way that humans did, but Patrick was sure he was wrong. The possum felt deeply. It felt rage and hatred. It wanted to kill them for what they had done to it. And though Patrick knew he was safe, knew the cage would hold, knew his father would soon slide a pistol between the bars and fire, he kept his distance and flinched every time the possum crashed its body against the enclosure.

Of course he knows what the thing is. A lycan. He has heard about them his whole life, has read about them in novels, history books, newspapers, watched them in movies, television shows. But he has never seen one, not in person. Transformation is forbidden.

The lycan moves so quickly it is difficult for Patrick to make sense of it—to secure an image of it—except that it looks like a man, only covered in a downy gray hair, like the hair of the possum. Teeth flash. Foam rips from a seat cushion like a strip of fat. Blood splatters, decorating the porthole windows, dripping from the ceiling. It is sometimes on all fours and sometimes balanced on its hind legs. Its back is hunched. Its face is marked by a blunt snout that flashes teeth as long and sharp as bony fingers, a skeleton's fist of a smile. And its hands—oversize and decorated with long nails—are greedily outstretched and slashing the air. A woman's face tears away like a mask. Ropes of intestine are yanked out of a belly. A neck is chewed through in a terrible kiss. A little boy is snatched up and thrown against the wall, his screams silenced.

The plane is shuddering. The pilot is yelling something over the intercom, but his voice is lost to the screams that fill the cabin. Some people are weeping. Some are praying. Some are climbing out of their seats, pushing their way up the aisle, where they bang at the cockpit door, slam their fists and feet and shoulders up against it, desperate to get in, to get away from the terror working its way toward them.

Patrick remembers watching television the other night, flipping through the channels, coming across one of those talk-show pundits. The program featured a round-cheeked man who looked more like a boy with a gray flattop. He was talking about the lycans, about the protests in D.C. and the situation in the Republic. "To hell with us all being equal," the baby-faced man was saying, staring intensely into the camera. "Nobody's saying my dog has the same rights that I do. Biology made these decisions, not me."

His father took the remote and punched the power button, and the image collapsed upon itself. "That guy makes me lose my appetite," he said and forked at his spaghetti, not eating it, stirring it up into a red mess. His face was pale and bloated from all the injections, the temporary immunizations that could help ward off infection in case he was bitten. He would be leaving in a few days—with his Bay Area unit, the 235th Engineering Company—first to the Petaluma Armory for a week of intensive briefing, then overseas to the Republic, where his primary objective was route clearance, removing and diffusing bombs from roadsides. The IEDs—and the ambushes, the firefights—had increased lately. The lycans fought with their guns and claws alike—they wanted the American forces to leave; they wanted their country back. His father's rucksack was already packed and waiting by the back door, swollen and green and reminding Patrick of an enormous gut sack pulled from a deer carcass.

The war is the reason this is happening. It is the reason he is on this plane and it is the reason the lycan is tearing the plane to pieces. Patrick curses the war and curses the lycan and curses his father, who he wishes were with him now. His father, who would

ball up his fists and fight. He wouldn't piss himself, as Patrick does now, his jeans hot and soaked, the Coke finally finding its way out of him, sheeting his legs, filling his shoes.

The rear of the plane is splashed with blood that oozes from the walls in strange cave-painting designs. Bodies are strewn everywhere in various poses of death like a garden of ruined statues. Up to this point, the woman next to Patrick has not moved or said a word, frozen in her fear. Her laptop remains open, one of her hands still on its keyboard, pressed down so severely that the open document scrolls continuously, its pages filling with the letters of one long word no one will ever read. But now, as the lycan makes its way toward their row, she tries to stand and can't, held down by her seat belt. She whimpers as she fumbles with it and then abandons her seat and hesitates in the aisle, turning back for her laptop, snatching it off the tray table. At that moment the lycan lunges forward and claws away the laptop and brings it down on her head, with a wet *thunk* and a smoking spark. Pieces of plastic rain to the floor. Wires dangle like veins from around her neck, where part of the screen still hangs. The lycan pulls her close, as if to embrace her, burying its triangular face in her neck.

At that moment there is a scream that rises above all the others. An Asian man—one of the flight attendants—is hurrying up the aisle, his progress slow and stumbling due to the carnage. He has come from the rear kitchen and he has in one hand a steaming carafe of coffee and in the other a can opener with a curved silver tooth.

The lycan tosses the woman aside just as the man underhands the coffee in a sloshing brown arc. The woman's body impacts Patrick before he can see what happens, but he can hear the lycan crying out, unmistakably in pain, its voice pitched high.

He is knocked back against the wall. He does not push the woman away. He allows her to press him down between the seats, to shield him. The smell of her perfume is mixed up with the smell of her blood. It is hard to tell with the turbulence, but her body seems to tremble and he thinks she might still be alive. He hugs her

close. He closes his eyes and in his own private darkness tries to imagine himself back in bed, back in California, waiting for his father to wake him up, to tell him it is time to go. He wishes that he could close his ears, too, to the screams that continue for the next thirty minutes, the longest of his life.