

*An Interruption*

From every grain of sand in the valley came a terrific silence. It rose from every flat surface of every particle like heat off of pavement. It distorted the clearness, its intensity clogging the ears of everything surrounding it. When the gun was fired, it flattened the silence that had been building all morning. The noise echoed off of the surrounding rocky peaks, dying slowly and lasting from morning until night.

The snake bounced. Sliding sideways across the dirt and then rolling, reminding everyone that it was, in fact, only a cylinder despite so often seeming to be much more, before regaining its composure. It hissed savagely, unable to propel itself in any direction in particular, but whipping its body back and forth, creating a serpentine snow angel in the loose, surface sand. Dark blood, a deep purple, or maybe even black but glinting colorfully in the morning sun, trickled from the rough gash the bullet had left.

He kicked dirt onto the snake, now writhing only slowly, as if trying to regain the sheets from a bedmate thief. The dull grains of beige clung to the glistening blood, but, to the displeasure of Carter, failed to stick to the shimmering snake. He should have known better. A creature that spends all its life slithering over sand couldn't stick to every grain. Besides, it's not as if snakes are slimy. They are dry, except where they bleed. That's a surprise every middle school kid has when he is first allowed to handle a snake in

school or catches one in his neighbor's garden. They aren't slimy at all. Why would sand stick to them?

Carter carefully replaced the gun into the holster that fit comfortably and loosely on his belt. He pulled the leather strap over the sweaty piece of steel where his palm had held the weapon. He gave it a swift and comradely pat and looked at the snake and the sandy blood. He smiled. Even if the sand hadn't clung to the snake, the dulled look of the impure blood was enough to take some of the painterly quality from the scene. In a few minutes, the snake would stop moving and what was left of the wet blood would seep into the dry ground that surely begged for its moisture. Then he would just have a dead snake. He could deal with a dead snake.

He was behind schedule now. He finished his walk to the low, stone barn in which the cows spent the night. Sliding the wooden stool into place with a kick of his right foot, he seated himself and tugged at the udders of Athena, the sandy colored cow that was the larger and lazier of the pair. Susana, or "Sweet, Sweet, Suz" as Carter had taken to calling her, was already out of the barn. No doubt traipsing around the small yard littered with shit and shit covered hay, no doubt paying no mind to the dying snake. It was probably dead now anyway.

Milk slapped into the plastic bucket in sharp squirts, slowly descending in pressure and alternating in direction as Carter moved from one teat to the next. Each squirt was like a soft hiss in the quiet of the barn, and

the bucket steamed at first, the cold scratched plastic feeling the warm touch of the cow's fresh milk.