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Chapter 15
A Desert So Cold

MUSIC: BLIZZARD OF OSBORN THEME (FADE IN)

NARRATOR

You're listening to The Blizzard of Osborn by Michael Sheen Cuddy. First, we thank Rick Scott, aerospace engineer and Arizona amateur astronomer for letting us reproduce his photograph of the PANSTARRS comet and crescent moon used to illustrate Chapter 15, A Desert So Cold.

MUSIC: BLIZZARD OF OSBORN THEME (FADE OUT)

Scene One: Int., rail barn – Night.

SOUND: Railway freight yard

NARRATOR

Cassie lifted the latch on the gate of Assam's stall. He stepped out and gave them each a grave look.

SOUND: Latch lifting, shuffling hooves

ASSAM

Now I know a way out of here but I'm afraid you're not gonna want to

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go along with it.

CASSIE

What is it?

ASSAM

I assume you will object.

SLY

Well try us.

ASSAM

I assume it'll all be too much for y'all.

MEMYSELFANDI

Oh stop playing games and just tell us!

ASSAM

Well, one of my duties here is hauling garbage out to the landfill. Every night I take a load out. If you burrow beneath the trash I can smuggle y'all out. No one ever looks inside the dumpster. If you can stand smelling garbage for an hour I can get you out into the desert.

MEMYSELFANDI

That's outrageous! We'd suffocate in there you ass!

NARRATOR

Assam bent down to a bale of hay and picked up a straw with his

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teeth.

ASSAM

Y'all can breathe through one of these. It'll smell awful but you'll be able to breathe in there. And unless you come up with a better idea I'm afraid this is your only chance. (braying laughter)

SLY

Let's see if I get this straight: you smuggle us out to the desert, then what? How do we find our way out of the desert?

ASSAM

I'll come back for y'all after I return the empty dumpster. Then I'll lead y'all across the desert.

SLY

Hey, I'm used to dragging myself through the muck. What about you Cassie, will you be able to stand it? And what about Jet?

CASSIE

Do we have a choice? Jet will be OK. She hunts mice in the compost all the time and doesn't mind the stink.

MUSIC: (Passage-MidTempo-050720.mp4)

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Scene Two: Ext., desert – Night.

SOUND: Wind, creaking cart, squeaky wheels, donkey hooves

NARRATOR

Claiming you can do something is, of course, easier than ... actually having to do it. For Cassie, even worse than the smell—which was horrible, by the way—was the slime! To stay hidden Assam told them to tunnel deep into the dumpster of rotting food, down into the rivulets of animal fat, gristle and blood, down below the stomach-turning gore of fish guts and sheep offal.

Sly didn't seem to mind as much as the others. He had curled up in such a tight coil he seemed impervious to the rot around him. Not so for Memyselfandi. He whined so much Cassie kept prodding him to be quiet in case one of the yard workers heard him as Assam hauled them away. After what felt like forever Memyselfandi blurted,

MEMYSELFANDI

Whew! Death by agony might not be so bad after all if it puts me out of my misery now.

SOUND: Donkey hooves

NARRATOR

Luckily for him, that's just when the garbage cart stopped.

SOUND: Creaking cart, squeaky wheels, donkey hooves STOP. Wind,

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coyotes in background.

ASSAM

Hey—y'all can come out now!

NARRATOR

Cassie, Jet, Sly and Memyselfandi climbed out of the dumpster. The desert air was cold but smelled fresh and was a great relief to breathe in. The second Cassie set her down Jet started cleaning herself.

MEMYSELFANDI

Good grief, how can she lick that filth off?

ASSAM

There's a water hole nearby where y'all can wash but you're gonna have to wait till morning because well, you can't see scorpions in the dark now can you? (braying laughter).

MEMYSELFANDI

Oh dear, I *knew* I should have stayed up on that wall all by myself.

SLY

Yeah but look at all the fun you'd be missing out on!

MEMYSELFANDI

This is *precisely* the kind of fun I can do without, thank you very much.

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ASSAM

Now listen here—I have to bring this garbage to the landfill now. After it's emptied I'll meet y'all back here, then we'll start our real journey.

MEMYSELFANDI

Why don't we just start now?

ASSAM

Because they're expecting the night delivery at the landfill. If it don't show up they'll know something's wrong and then come looking for me.

MEMYSELFANDI

They're going to know something's wrong tomorrow when you don't show up.

ASSAM

Yeah, but that's tomorrow. By then we'll be well into the desert.

MEMYSELFANDI

How can you be so sure they won't track us in the desert?

ASSAM

'Cause I know how to lose 'em. Now will you stop asking all these questions and let me do my job? Everyone just stay put till I come back. And don't even think about tryin' to find your way without me,

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'cause you ain't never gonna make it (braying laughter).

SOUND: Donkey hooves, wind

NARRATOR

After an hour huddled in the cold Sly asked the questions the others were thinking but hadn't asked:

SLY

You think we can trust that ass? What if this is a setup?

CASSIE

If Assam wanted to turn us in he could have saved himself a lot of trouble and done that back in the freight yard.

SLY

Hmmm....

SOUND: Wind, coyotes

MUSIC: (DesertWind-AmbientMix1-050720)

CASSIE (shivering)

Who would have thought a desert could get so cold?

NARRATOR

As the night wore on it got colder and colder. Finally, after hours, Assam came back.

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SOUND: Treading donkey hooves

MEMYSELFANDI

Finally! We were beginning to think you had abandoned us.

ASSAM

Now why would I do that? I wanna see the Emperor as bad as y'all do.

MUSIC: (DesertWind-AmbientMix1)

Scene Three: Ext., desert – Day.

SOUND: birds chirping, mourning dove

NARRATOR

Cassie hadn't slept well. Between the cold air and the stench of garbage she couldn't get comfortable. Memyselfandi claimed he never slept a wink, the stink made him gag, though it didn't bother Sly; he said he was used to smelling pungent odors from the earth. And Jet? Well Jet was a cat so she could sleep anywhere, anytime she felt like it.

When the sun rose it shone a soft pink light on the gray rock. Everyone was eager to get going. Assam led them to the promised water hole. The water was black and still but everyone—even Memyselfandi—was happy to wash off the smelly garbage.

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SOUND: water splashing

After they were all clean Assam took them to a thicket of shrubs he called *bellicore* trees.

ASSAM

The *bellicore* is a highly nutritious fruit. The juicy core lies within this tough, spiky shell.

CASSIE

It looks like a chestnut.

ASSAM

I never heard of no chessnut. All I know is you got to be very careful handling this shell. If the pointy spikes prick your skin you'll get an itch that'll drive you mad. But if you handle it carefully, by its stem alone, and pull along this hair-like seam, the outer casing opens to reveal a sweet pink core. It's delicious, tastes like a blend of watermelon and strawberry.

MUSIC: (Passage-MidTempo-050720.m4a)

NARRATOR

Sly was the first to notice them. As he crawled along the rocky ground he could feel the vibrations in his belly. He turned, stood up as high as he could then told the others to look behind them.

A dust cloud and a deep rumble were approaching: Empire Rail

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Services security forces zooming in fast.

SOUND: vibrations, rumbling, revving engines

MEMYSELFANDI (shrieking)

You said you could help us escape!

ASSAM

Well we ain't caught yet—long as you do as I say.

NARRATOR

They looked at one another, not seeing a way out.

ASSAM

Climb to the top of that ridge!

NARRATOR

Assam pointed to a rim of red rock rising from the flat ground around them. The ridge formed a U-shaped wall half-circling the area where they stood.

Hurrying to the highest point on the ridge, Assam directed them to a rickety rope ladder made from mesquite branches and saw grass.

ASSAM

Cassie! Hook the top rung around a boulder and throw the other end down to the base of the rock wall. Now everybody climb down there and wait for my signal!

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MEMYSELFANDI

You expect me to climb down that rickety rope ladder?

SLY

Shut up and just do it!

NARRATOR

Cassie picked up Jet and was about to climb down the ladder when she saw Sly struggling.

CASSIE

Sly—wrap yourself around my neck—but don't squeeze too hard!

SLY

Okay!

NARRATOR

When Cassie, Jet, Sly and Memyselfandi were all down at the bottom of the rock wall Assam used his teeth to pull the rope ladder back up.

SLY

Hey! What's going on up there? Is this a trap?

ASSAM

Ah! You'll see. (braying laughter)

NARRATOR

Just then, the Empire Rail Services security jeep thundered to a halt

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and a guard barked into a bullhorn:

ERS GUARD

You are under arrest for trespassing on Empire Rail Services property. You are now trapped in a box canyon surrounded on three sides by sheer rock. You cannot escape. We are coming in to seize you. We are heavily armed so any attempt to resist will be met with deadly force.

MEMYSELFANDI

Oh I *knew* we should have never listened to a jackass!

NARRATOR

The jeep raced ahead for about 20 feet then came to a dead stop. The front end pitched forward as the wheels began to sink. Its motor choked off.

SOUND: motor revving, sputtering out, water gurgle

ERS GUARD

Quicksand!

NARRATOR

One of the guards in the back seat panicked and jumped out of the jeep.

ERS GUARD

No don't!

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NARRATOR

The driver shouted but it was too late. The guard who jumped landed knee-deep in mucky sand and couldn't free himself.

SOUND: guard screaming

NARRATOR

Assam kicked the rope ladder back down and told his new friends to climb up.

ASSAM

We have to get away as fast away as possible. Trust me, you *don't* want to be around to hear these guys as they sink.

MUSIC: (Desertwind-AmbientMix1-050720 – FADE OUT)

MUSIC: Blizzard Theme (FADE IN / OUT)

NARRATOR

Next: Every great journey presents different paths. When two choices both carry serious risks, which one do you choose?

[end Chapter 15]