

A.S. BERMAN

WOLVES LEFT DREAM ING



PROLOGUE
EMPTY VESSELS

Sedona, Arizona. It's late afternoon when the girls emerge from the forest. Some 20 feet above them on the bridge, two couples debate where they should have dinner, their eyes seldom leaving their phones. Further along the rusting expanse, college students take pictures of each other leaning back against the railing. Only a boy and a girl ditching their high school classes for the day seem to notice the new arrivals below.

Even from this distance they can make out that one of the girls has long frizzy red hair, which sticks to her face in clumps; the other appears Asian, peering up at them through black-framed glasses, a bloody scrape on one knee. Something small dangles against her chest glinting in the sunshine. Both stare back up at the boy and girl on the bridge with quiet resolve. If every day is the first day of the rest of your life, their expressions seem to say, every day is also the final, dying gasp of the one that came before.

Five hours earlier.

Trying on a small Thor's hammer necklace, Morgan swept up her long frizzy red hair and studied the effect in the mirror; she spotted Hannah in its reflection behind her.

Looking more like a little girl than the college sophomore she was, Morgan's new roommate, in a pink tee and dark blue shorts, was engaged in deep conversation with a tall, willowy blond girl on the other side of the crowded New Age shop.

'Maybe this is what she needed,' Morgan thought. 'Maybe sometimes you just need to be surrounded by patchouli and crystals and people who compliment you on the healthy color of your aura.'

Hannah had only just moved into Morgan's house back in Phoenix the month before after being tossed out of her old place for feeding the pigeons. Both had viewed this weekend road trip to the beautiful red mountains of Sedona as a way to get to know each other better outside the confines of their work life at Target, and to blow off a little steam between semesters at Arizona State University.

"Heyyy," Morgan trilled, joining Hannah and her new friend with a broad smile she did not feel. "Who's this?"

"I'm Erica," said the blonde, looking her up and down with eyes that weighed and dismissed her, "as in 'America.'"

"Erica's been telling me about the different uses of gems and crystals," Hannah explained, sliding her black-framed glasses up her tiny nose. "Very interesting."

Erica's gaze fell to the charm Morgan forgot she was still wearing; she made a face.

"No good?" Morgan asked, following her gaze.

"I like to keep an open mind about all life choices," Erica sniffed, "but it's a little too 'White Power' for these times, don't you think? I mean it's just so easy to send the wrong message today."

"Oh right, yeah." Morgan felt her cheeks burn. "It just looked kind of cool but yeah, I get it." Removing the pendant she hung it on the nearest peg, which also held an assortment of small velvet bags. Erica made another face; Morgan ignored her this time.

"I was going to ask you," Erica said, returning her attention to Hannah,

"what's that supposed to be?" She prodded the metal cylinder dangling against the girl's chest. "Is it...Eastern?"

Morgan concealed a chuckle at this clumsy reference to Hannah's Korean heritage beneath a feigned yawn.

"I don't know where it was made exactly," Hannah replied. "But it was used by the allies to send messages by pigeon during World War II."

"Ew, pigeons." Yet another face from Erica. "Rats with wings."

"Have you any idea how many soldiers' lives were saved by homing pigeons during the wars," Hannah asked, her normally soft tone cracking slightly.

"Oh my God, like the code-talkers," Erica blurted, as if this had been the topic of conversation all along. "I saw something on YouTube that showed how Native Americans helped pass secret messages around during the war and the Nazis never knew! Isn't that amazing?!"

Morgan was on the verge of pointing out just how little gratitude either the pigeons or the indigenous tribes had received for their wartime contributions when the shop door opened and a dozen or so people drifted inside in a cloud of white hair, pony tails and turquoise.

"Oh shit, it's almost time—nice meeting you," Erica said with little interest as she turned to leave. "I better grab a seat before they're all gone."

"What's going on," Morgan asked.

Erica regarded her with disbelief. "Simon Braden. He's reading from *The Cold-Blooded Shadow* in a few minutes. Isn't that why you're *here*?"

"We're just in town for the weekend," Hannah explained. "What's *The Cold-Blooded Shadow*?"

"I'm sorry," came a voice from behind them. "Did you just ask 'What's *The Cold-Blooded Shadow*?'"

A large, motherly woman with wild white hair and owl-like spectacles grabbed Hannah and Morgan by a hand each and tugged them gently past the still-growing crowd. "Excuse us, please—newbies coming through."

“We find ourselves in strange times,” Simon Braden intoned in his polished West London accent, glancing briefly out over the throngs packed shoulder-to-shoulder in the back room of the store. “Chilled by the unshakable feeling that we are on a fast-moving Titanic, iceberg bound, with no sane hand on the wheel. But...”

Out came the handkerchief that made an appearance at every presentation he gave. Spying Lenora seated off to the side in the front row, he gave her a little smile.

“As I came to discover last year,” he continued, “and indeed as I aim to share with you now in the pages of this new book, this view of our world is not quite accurate. It turns out that it isn’t so much that there is no hand on the tiller, but rather several hands grabbing for it constantly, and all at once. The results...are all around us.”

The leathery looking owner of the shop perked up at this, beamed at the author from beneath her mop of white hair, and materialized at his side.

“The original edition of *The Cold-Blooded Shadow* is probably known to a number of you already,” she said with a knowing smile. “Before we go any farther, Simon, would you mind explaining to us what makes this one different?”

Glancing briefly at Lenora for reassurance he smiled, cleared his throat, and took another stab at explaining the project that had occupied the last year of his life.

“Yes, well, as Nancy intimates, *The Cold-Blooded Shadow* was originally published nearly 10 years ago and laid out my understanding at that time of the alien race that lives among us. Back then I referred to them as Reptilians—”

A hand shot up in the audience.

“A term, I hasten to add, that I replaced with ‘The Others’ in later books after discovering my fellow author, your own country’s Howard Mayvale, had adopted it for his own works.”

The hand wavered momentarily, then sank.

“As I’m sure you can appreciate, I was forced to infer a great deal about these creatures’ biology, motives and movements throughout our world based on various pieces of information I discovered in my research. That was until last year.”

Glancing briefly at Lenora he continued. “It was at that point that I was presented with a most unusual copy of *The Cold-Blooded Shadow*. As I’m sure you’ve all learned by now, that copy, the only one in existence to the best of my knowledge, was very special in that it had been thoroughly annotated by hand.”

“...by one of the very creatures that you had written about in that book,” the shop owner announced with unrestrained excitement.

Despite this being common knowledge to those gathered—it had been made quite a lot of by the book’s publisher during the launch of the new edition a month earlier—the audible gasps in the small room seemed to testify to the power of actually hearing this information spoken aloud.

“As you will discover in this new edition of the book, complete with that, uh, being’s annotations, they do in fact refer to themselves as the Heliss,” Simon explained. “And their internecine battles for power behind the scenes are the source of the chaos that so mystifies us in our own society today.”

“So what did you make of it all,” the shop owner asked Hannah and Morgan later as she finished ringing up the copy of *The Cold-Blooded Shadow* the girls had purchased between them.

“The whole space lizards wearing human skins thing? I don’t know—to each their own, I guess,” Morgan said diplomatically. “But who knows, right? After the last few years, I don’t find anything unbelievable anymore.” Hannah merely looked down at her sneakers.

“I think you two were probably the youngest people here.”

Turning they were met with a warm smile from the attractive black woman who'd sat in the front row throughout the presentation. "Still in school," she asked.

"College," said Morgan. "Back in Phoenix."

Out came a slender, graceful hand. "I'm Lenora. I look after Simon when he's on the road."

Upon hearing his name, the author joined them, looking at Lenora as if for reassurance. It was clear to Morgan that there was more between them than just a professional relationship. But what did this thirtysomething, attractive woman see in the balding, slightly paunchy middle-aged man?

"It's OK," Lenora said with a laugh. "They're not stalkers. I don't believe they'd even heard of you until today."

"Well thank heaven for that," he sighed. "Of course if that's true, this all probably sounded like the most ridiculous nonsense to you both."

Morgan frowned. "So how would it work, these aliens wearing human skins? I mean that's what you're saying, right? All these important people are actually lizard things going around telling us what to do from behind human faces."

"I think you'll find all the hows and whys in the book, at least as far as I understand them. But yes, that's basically it." He chuckled. "It sounds quite mad when you say it out loud, doesn't it?"

A brief look passed between the author and Lenora. It reminded Morgan of those times when her father revealed "family business" in conversation, only to quickly glance over at her mother in apology.

Simon lowered his voice. "There was something that I didn't include in the book, mostly because I was still trying to understand it myself at the time."

"What was that," asked Hannah, suddenly interested.

"It's something I picked up from Br—the entity who marked up the book. I don't want to get into the specifics of our interactions but there was a certain sense I got from...it."

"A sense of what?" Morgan asked.

"Well, I suppose the sense of what a burden it all is, really. The great weight that comes with passing themselves off as human beings and functioning in our world. It drives some of them mad, apparently. Why there's this one fellow—one of their number, you understand—who actually prepared human skins so that they could be worn by the Heliss. He was one of several, actually—'tailors' they call them. Anyway, he fled the whole Heliss society, it seems. Just 'poof'—gone! No one knows why."

Lenora made a noise, shaking her head ever so slightly, and the author let the thought die quietly away. "Anyway," he said. "While there are a great many things going on behind the scenes with the Heliss, I am far more concerned by just how many 'empty' human beings there are walking about today. People filling our streets, rudderless, completely empty, careening through life, utterly oblivious to the damage they're doing to other people, the earth, and the very order of things."

"Simon, please," Lenora scolded gently, giving the girls an embarrassed smile. "You sound like an angry old hermit; what will you have them think of us?"

Morgan reassured them that they hadn't taken offense but Hannah remained silent. The man had, in just a few words, given voice to a stark dread that she'd felt growing inside her for years.

After parting ways with the couple, Hannah and Morgan drove around Sedona in search of a place to get some hiking in before dinner. Parking just off the main road they tore open a bag of trail mix and perched themselves on a large rock in a gravel parking lot across from a massive rusting bridge.

Hannah watched a middle-age couple survey the structure blankly as if attending the showing of a house neither was particularly interested in touring. "Empty human beings," she muttered.

A few minutes later she and Morgan scurried down a leafy incline until they reached the bottom beneath the bridge. There they discovered another world packed with lush green vegetation that seemed to envelop them in soothing mists, aromas and birdsong—the complete opposite of Phoenix’s dry desert lands back home.

Stopping to rest on a small, grassy island ringed by a meandering stream, Hannah perched on the edge of a boulder, rubbing blood from a scraped knee. Smiling up into the leafy canopy, she said softly, “Do we really have to go back? I think this is the first time since I moved out here that I actually feel like I belong.”

“Phoenix isn’t so bad,” Morgan said, taking a seat beside her. “Well sometimes it isn’t, anyway.”

Hannah played with her necklace, squinting against the sunlight reflected off the water beneath their feet.

“What Simon said back there; it’s true, isn’t it?”

Morgan laughed. “What, you believe in aliens now?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like it’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard. I mean my mom’s always been super-religious, going on all the time about the Rapture.”

“Ugh.”

“I know. Still, there’s this feeling I’ve had for a long time now when I look around at other people, the way they act. It’s like maybe the Rapture already happened, and all that’s left are these empty bodies walking around.”

A lizard darted across the stream bank. Morgan’s gaze followed until it disappeared into a thicket. “Astral corpses,” she said absently.

“Astral what?”

“Corpses. Just something I found in one of those books at that New Agey place. Apparently it’s this idea that when we die sometimes we leave these spirit ‘shells’ behind, and those are what people call ghosts. Or something. I don’t know—I just skimmed it.” She shrugged. “It made

sense at the time.”

Time passed. The sun disappeared behind the trees and the stream grew dark. “We should be getting back to the motel,” Morgan sighed, hopping off the rock.

Reluctantly Hannah, too, dismounted, giving the vast wilderness one last look before joining her roommate on the trek back to the car. No words passed between them during their journey. A common feeling of loss seemed to rise from the ground and envelop them both.

Twenty minutes later they emerged from the forest, blinking into the last rays of sunlight as it poured over the rusty bridge above. The people upon it, most looking down at their phones, seemed as if they’d been preserved forever in amber. Shadows made melancholy by the emptiness of the vessels that cast them.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN FRANCIS

Denver. Day's already lost the light, cold settlin' into people's bones for the night. Miserable little city full of bad roads and crumblin' warehouses, hipster types and homeless Charlies tryin' to eke out one more day. Cold's makin' my legs play up somethin' fierce. Gee-zuss I'm gettin' too old for this.

Could be worse, I suppose. Right now I find myself front row center in a quaint little church, all flickerin' candles and stained glass, warm and toasty like. Never ceases to amaze me how one of the Almighty's palaces looks like another inside. Like any good franchise, really.

Door opens, cold air on the back of my neck. Before she even enters the joint I smells her good and strong at the back of my throat. And I wonder: Is that the beast in me, or the man?

For what we are about to receive may we be truly thankful, oh Lord.

Outta the corner of my eye I see she's well put together. Not bad lookin' for a dame if that's yer thing. Short blond hair fussed over for hours by some fag hairdresser called 'enri or André or some such. A little more hippy than hip in them slacks. Then there's that nose, all pushed up like a sow's from nights spent peekin' at the neighbors, or jammed tight against

endless dating profiles on the computer. *Don't worry, boys. I done squeezed out one pup years ago—I shan't be wantin' more.*

Sittin' herself down on the bench a few feet away, she closes her eyes and starts prayin'. I gives her a minute alone with her maker.

"Like flyin' coach class, innit?"

"I'm sorry?"

"These pews." I emphasize the lack of leg room by slappin' the hymn book rack in front of me. "Right down to the in-flight readin' material. Course what's the Bible if not a book of emergency instructions? I mean who actually reads the thing till the plane's goin' down? Then again the church turns that all on its head, don't it? A place of calm, safe as houses, while the rest of the world burns."

"How...poetic," she allows, before her head bows to the Holy Gee once more. I like it. Simple, direct: Fuck off, pal.

Not knowin' where else to look I peers up at our Lord 'N Savior hangin' there in that 'Don't mind me' way of his.

"Imagine it, Missus," I say. "There you are sufferin' something awful up there on the cross and what do people do? They march right into your house at all hours just to tell you about *their* problems. Does even one of 'em offer to help ya down, maybe hold a few drops of that wine to your lips to ease the pain? Like hell they do. It's all me, me, me."

She's starin' at me now. Then without a word she picks up her purse and starts to get up.

"Ya really don't want to do that, Mary."

Freezes like a rabbit, she does, that plump derrière of hers hoverin' above the pew.

"Did Matthew send you?"

Slickin' back what's left of my once magnificent mane I gives her the full benefit of my bought-and-paid-fors. "Name's Francis."

I can see them little connections bein' made behind those eyes as she takes in my grubby gray overcoat covered in stains, the beat-up old

fedora in my lap. Am I one of Matthew's nasty friends is what she wants to ask but can't because our culture don't offer her an easy way into that question, least ways not this soon. We've only just met, after all. World's fallin' ta pieces all around us but there are still a few of us left that abide by the rules.

"Is Matthew all right?"

"Right as rain. Saw him just the other week as it happens. Good lad. Much to be proud of."

She plops back down on the bench again and I see it all dance like shadows in her eyes: hope and caution, faith and fear. And always, always that one reassuring hum at the back of the mind: *He's just an old man, he can't possibly hurt me.*

"Matthew's been missing for a month now," she whispers, leaning in close, anger bubbling up through her desperation. That her life's happiness could rest on the words of a crapped out old vagrant like myself—what is the world comin' to? "If you know *anything*—"

"Take it easy there, Mary. What say you and me take a little walk, give these other people a crack at Our Lord for a while?"

She starts to give me some lip but stops the moment I get up and hobble a step or two. Not so tough now, eh Mary? Can't quite bring yourself to yell at an old cripple.

With a little effort I limps my way toward the door; all an act of course. Give the crowd what they wants, I always say.

"Mr. Francis, I came here tonight because I received an email from my son earlier this week telling me that he wasn't coming home, but very much wanted me to come here and meet a friend of his. That he—you—would 'help me understand.' But if you're just going to play little games with me—"

"Life is a game," I says, a trifle louder than she's comfortable with. Her eyes dart around the church in search of eavesdroppers, perhaps, or maybe a little muscle in case the old man gets feisty. "Correction—Life is

game.” I likes the sound of that. “Hey, where you goin’?”

She’s headed for the door and I’m getting that little flutter in the chest that always comes when the deer is ready to bolt.

“How can I be sure you even know Matthew?!”

“Ya said it yourself, ya got an email.”

“Anyone can send an email.”

“How’s about this? He told me all about his mummy dearest who threw him into therapy every time she caught him dressin’ up real purdy in her clothes. Ring some bells?”

That pretty little face goes all white. I gives her a toothy grin, push open the door to a cold night. Won’t be sorry to see the back of this town. “After you,” I coo.

Pulling her fur collar up around her ear holes she stumbles out into the night, looking confused, beaten. Easy.

Suddenly she turns on me. “Do you get some kind of sick thrill out of this?”

“Awww hell. I comes all this way to repair the gap between mother and son, my leg painin’ me somethin’ awful, and here you stand askin’ me that?” I throws myself around like Hamlet with a case of the will-I-won’ts and grumble, “Why do I even bother?”

Outta the corner of my eye I sees her face soften a little and I know the bait’s been took. “You will tell me about Matthew,” she asks.

“Look, there’s a little pizza joint just up the road. It’s not much but we can get in outta the cold and have us a quiet little conflag without too many ears pryin’. What say?”

She don’t say nothin’ at all but steps carefully out onto the icy church steps, waitin’ for me to lead the way.

Traffic’s pretty light now. There are few people on the sidewalks, which makes me feel loads better. As I hobble my way over the ice I briefly wonder if there *is* a pizza place down the road. But of course there is. There always is.

“Please,” she says, hovering at my shoulder, “tell me about Matthew.”

“Happy to, Mary, happy to. It all started back in Phoenix...”

