

CHAPTER 3



prospect of heading right to the hidden huts of the Quimare dynasty was better than I could have hoped for. The only problem was, Salvador was still talking.

"...I'm pretty sure I know the way," he continued. "I've never actually been there. *"Pues, lo que sea."* Well, whatever. "We'll find it. Eventually."

Ordinarily, that would sound a little ominous, but compared with everyone else I'd talked with, Salvador was wildly optimistic. Since fleeing into no-man's-land four hundred years ago, the Tarahumara have spent their time perfecting the art of invisibility. Many Tarahumara still live in cliffside caves reachable only by long climbing poles; once inside, they pull up the poles and vanish into the rock. Others live in huts so ingeniously camouflaged, the great Norwegian explorer Carl Lumholtz was once startled to discover he'd trekked right past an entire Tarahumara village without detecting a hint of homes or humans.

Lumholtz was a true backwoods badass who'd spent years living among headhunters in Borneo before heading into Tarahumara Land in the late 1890s. But you can sense even his fortitude grinding thin after he'd dragged himself through deserts and up death-defying cliffs, only to arrive at last in the heart of Tarahumara country to find . . .

No one.

"To look at these mountains is a soul-inspiring sensation; but to travel over them is exhaustive to muscle and patience," Lumholtz wrote in *Unknown Mexico: A Record of Five Years' Exploration Among the Tribes of the Western Sierra Madre*. "Nobody except those who have travelled in the Mexican mountains can understand and appreciate the difficulties and anxieties attending such a journey."

And that's assuming you make it as far as the mountains in the first place. "On first encounter, the region of the Tarahumara appears inaccessible," the French playwright Antonin Artaud grumbled after he sweated and inched his way into the Copper Canyons in search of shamanic wisdom in the 1930s. "At best, there are a few poorly marked trails that every twenty yards seem to disappear under the ground." When Artaud and his guides finally did discover a path, they had to gulp hard before taking it: subscribing to the principle that the best trick for throwing off pursuers was to travel places

FIGURING OUT WHERE over the border, however, was going to be tricky.

Runner's World magazine assigned me to trek into the Barrancas in search of the Tarahumara. But before I could start looking for the ghosts, I'd need to find a ghost hunter. Salvador Holguín, I was told, was the only man for the job.

By day, Salvador is a thirty-three-year-old municipal administrator in Guachochi, a frontier town on the edge of the Copper Canyons. By night, he's a barroom mariachi singer, and he looks it; with his beer gut and black-eyed, rose-in-the-teeth good looks, he's the exact image of a guy who splits his life between desk chairs and bar stools. Salvador's brother, however, is the Indiana Jones of the Mexican school system; every year, he loads a burro with pencils and workbooks and bushwhacks into the Barrancas to resupply the canyon-bottom schools. Because Salvador is game for just about anything, he has occasionally blown off work to accompany his brother on these expeditions.

"*Hombre*, no problem," he told me once I'd tracked him down. "We can go see Arnulfo Quimare. . . ."

If he'd stopped right there, I'd have been ecstatic. While searching for a guide, I'd learned that Arnulfo Quimare was the greatest living Tarahumara runner, and he came from a clan of cousins, brothers, in-laws, and nephews who were nearly as good. The

where only a lunatic would follow, the Tarahumara snake their trails over suicidally steep terrain.

"A false step," an adventurer named Frederick Schwatka jotted in his notebook during a Copper Canyon expedition in 1888, "would send the climber two hundred to three hundred feet to the bottom of the canyon, perhaps a mangled corpse."

Schwatka was no prissy Parisian poet, either; he was a U.S. Army lieutenant who'd survived the frontier wars and later lived among the Sioux as an amateur anthropologist, so the man knew from mangled corpses. He'd also traveled the baddest of badlands in his time, including a hellacious two-year expedition to the Arctic Circle. But when he got to the Copper Canyons, he had to recalibrate his scoring table. Scanning the ocean of wilderness around him, Schwatka felt a quick pulse of admiration—"The heart of the Andes or the crests of the Himalayas contain no more sublime scenery than the wild, unknown fastnesses of the Sierra Madres of Mexico"—before being jerked back to morbid bewilderment: "How they can rear children on these cliffs without a loss of one hundred percent annually is to me one of the most mysterious things connected with these strange people."

Even today, when the Internet has shrunk the world into a global village and Google satellites let you spy on a stranger's backyard on the other side of the country, the traditional Tarahumara remain as ghostly as they were four hundred years ago. In the mid-1990s, an expeditionary group was pushing into the deep Barrancas when they were suddenly rattled by the feeling of invisible eyes:

"Our small party had been hiking for hours through Mexico's Barranca del Cobre—the Copper Canyon—without seeing a trace of any other human being," wrote one member of the expedition. "Now, in the heart of a canyon even deeper than the Grand Canyon, we heard the echoes of Tarahumara drums. Their simple beats were faint at first, but soon gathered strength. Echoing off stony ridges, it was impossible to tell their number or location. We looked to our guide for direction. '*¿Quién sabe?*' she said. 'Who knows? The Tarahumara can't be seen unless they want to be.'"

The moon was still high when we set off in Salvador's trusty four-wheel-drive pickup. By the time the sun came up, we'd left pavement

far behind and were jouncing along a dirt track that was more like a creek bed than a road, grinding along in low, low gear as we pitched and rolled like a tramp steamer on stormy seas.

I tried keeping track of our location with a compass and map, but I sometimes couldn't tell if Salvador was making a deliberate turn or taking evasive action around a fallen boulder. Soon, it didn't matter—wherever we were, it wasn't part of the known world; we were still snaking along a narrow gash through the trees, but the map showed nothing but untouched forest.

"*Mucha mota por aquí,*" Salvador said, swirling a finger at the hills around us. Lots of marijuana around here.

Because the Barrancas are impossible to police, they've become a base for two rival drug cartels, Los Zetas and the New Bloods. Both were manned by ex-Army Special Forces and were absolutely ruthless; the Zetas were notorious for plunging uncooperative cops into burning barrels of diesel fuel and feeding captured rivals to the gang's mascot—a Bengal tiger. After the victims stopped screaming, their scorched and tiger-gnawed heads were carefully harvested as marketing tools; the cartels liked to mark their territory by, in one case, impaling the heads of two police officers outside a government building with a sign in Spanish reading LEARN SOME RESPECT. Later that same month, five heads were rolled onto the dance floor of a crowded nightclub. Even way out here on the fringes of the Barrancas, some six bodies were turning up a week.

But Salvador seemed totally unconcerned. He drove on through the woods, throatily butchering something about a bra full of bad news named Maria. Suddenly, the song died in his mouth. He snapped off the tape player, his eyes fixed on a red Dodge pickup with smoked-black glass that had just burst through the dust ahead of us. "*Narcotraficantes,*" he muttered.

Drug runners. Salvador edged as close as he could to the cliff edge on our right and eased even further back on the gas, dropping deferentially from the ten miles per hour we'd been averaging down to a dead halt, granting the big red Dodge every bit of road he could spare.

No trouble here was the message he was trying to send. *Just minding our own, non-mota business. Just don't stop . . .* because what would we say if they cut us off and came piling out, demanding that we speak

slowly and clearly into the barrels of their assault rifles while we explained what the hell we were doing way out here in the middle of Mexican marijuana country?

We couldn't even tell them the truth; if they believed us, we were dead. If Mexico's drug gangs hated anything as much as cops, it was singers and reporters. Not singers in any slang sense of snitches or stool pigeons; they hated real, guitar-strumming, love-song-singing crooners. Fifteen singers were executed by drug gangs in just eighteen months, including the beautiful Zayda Peña, the twenty-eight-year-old lead singer of Zayda y Los Culpables, who was gunned down after a concert; she survived, but the hit team tracked her to the hospital and blasted her to death while she was recovering from surgery. The young heartthrob Valentín Elizalde was killed by a barrage of bullets from an AK-47 just across the border from McAllen, Texas, and Sergio Gómez was killed shortly after he was nominated for a Grammy; his genitals were torched, then he was strangled to death and dumped in the street. What doomed them, as far as anyone could tell, was their fame, good looks, and talent; the singers challenged the drug lords' sense of their own importance, and so were marked for death.

The bizarre farva on balladeers was emotional and unpredictable, but the contract on reporters was all business. News articles about the cartels got picked up by American papers, which embarrassed American politicians, which put pressure on the Drug Enforcement Administration to crack down. Infuriated, the Zetas threw hand grenades into newsrooms, and even sent killers across the U.S. border to hunt down meddlesome journalists. After thirty reporters were killed in six years, the editor of the Villahermosa newspaper found the severed head of a low-level drug soldier outside his office with a note reading, "You're next." The death toll had gotten so bad, Mexico would eventually rank second only to Iraq in the number of killed or kidnapped reporters.

And now we'd saved the cartels a lot of trouble; a singer and a journalist had just driven smack into their backyard. I jammed my notebook down my pants and quickly scanned the front seat for more things to hide. It was hopeless; Salvador had his group's tapes scattered everywhere, a shiny red press pass was in my wallet, and right

between my feet was a backpack full of tape recorders, pens, and a camera.

The red Dodge pulled alongside us. It was a glorious, sunny day with a cool, pine-scented breeze, but the truck's windows were all tightly shut, leaving the mysterious crew invisible behind their smoked-black glass. The truck slowed to a rumbling crawl.
Just keep going, I chanted inside my head. Don't stop don't stop don't don't...

The truck stopped. I cut my eyes hard left and saw Salvador was staring straight ahead, his hands frozen on the steering wheel. I darted my eyes forward again and didn't move a muscle.
 We sat.
 They sat.
 We were silent.
 They were silent.

Six murders a week, I was thinking. Burned his balls off. I could see my head rolling between panicky stilettos on a Chihuahua dance floor.

Suddenly, a roar split the air. My eyes flashed left again. The big red Dodge was spitting back to life and growling on past. Salvador watched in the side-view mirror till the Deathmobile disappeared in a swirl of dust. Then he slapped the steering wheel and blasted his *ay-yay-yaying* tape again.
"¡Bueno!" he shouted. "*¡Ándale pues, a más aventuras!*" Excellent!
 On to more adventures!

Parts of me that had clenched tight enough to crack walnuts slowly began to relax. But not for long.
 A few hours later, Salvador stomped on the brakes. He backed up, cut a hard right off the rutted path, and started winding between the trees. We wandered farther and farther into the woods, crunching over pine needles and bouncing into gullies so deep I was banging my head on the roll bar.

As the woods got darker, Salvador got quieter. For the first time since our encounter with the Deathmobile, he even turned off the music. I thought he was drinking in the solitude and stillness, so I tried to sit back and appreciate it with him. But when I finally broke the silence with a question, he grunted moodily back at me. I began

to suspect what was going on: we were lost, and Salvador didn't want to admit it. I watched him more closely, and noticed he was slowing down to study the tree trunks, as if somewhere in the cuneiform bark was a decrytable road atlas.

"We're screwed," I realized. We had a one-in-four shot of this turning out well, which left three other possibilities: driving smack back into the Zetas, driving off a cliff in the dark, or driving around in the wilderness until the Clif Bars ran out and one of us ate the other.

And then, just as the sun set, we ran out of planet.

We emerged from the woods to find an ocean of empty space ahead—a crack in the earth so vast that the far side could be in a different time zone. Down below, it looked like a world-ending explosion frozen in stone, as if an angry god had been in the midst of destroying the planet, then changed his mind in mid-apocalypse. I was staring at twenty thousand square miles of wilderness, randomly slashed into twisting gorges deeper and wider than the Grand Canyon.

I walked to the edge of the cliff, and my heart started to pound. A sheer drop fell for about . . . ever. Far below, birds were swirling about. I could just make out the mighty river at the bottom of the canyon; it looked like a thin blue vein in an old man's arm. My stomach clenched. How the hell would we get down there? "We'll manage," Salvador assured me. "The Rarámuri do it all the time."

When I didn't look any more cheerful, Salvador came up with a silver lining. "Hey, it's better this way," he said. "It's too steep for *narcotraficantes* to mess around down there."

I didn't know if he really believed it or was lying to buck me up. Either way, he should have known better.

CHAPTER 4



TWO DAYS LATER, Salvador dropped his backpack, mopped his sweating face, and said, "We're here."

I looked around. There was nothing but rocks and cactus. "We're where?"

"*Aquí mismo*," Salvador said. "Right here. This is where the Quimare clan lives."

I didn't get what he was talking about. As far as the eye could see, it was exactly like the dark side of a lost planet we'd been hiking over for days. After ditching the truck on the rim of the canyon, we'd slid and scrambled our way down to the bottom. It had been a relief to finally walk on level ground, but not for long; after striking out upstream the next morning, we found ourselves wedged tighter and tighter between the soaring stone walls. We pushed on, holding our backpacks on our heads as we shoved against water up to our chests. The sun was slowly eclipsed by the steep walls, until we were inching our way through gurgling darkness, feeling as if we were slowly walking to the bottom of the sea.

Eventually, Salvador spotted a gap in the slick wall and we climbed through, leaving the river behind. By midday, I was longing for the gloomy dark again; with a baking sun overhead and nothing but bare rock all around, pulling ourselves up that slope was like climbing a steel sliding board. Salvador finally stopped, and I dropped against a rock to rest.

CONTINUE

Damn, he's tough, I thought. Sweat was pouring down Salvador's sunburned face, but he stayed on his feet. He had a strange, expectant look on his face.

"*¿Qué pasa?*" I asked. "What's up?"

"They're right here," Salvador said, pointing to a little hill.

I hauled myself back up. I followed him through a crack between the rocks, and found myself facing a dark opening. The hill was actually a small hut, fashioned from mud bricks and contoured into the hillside so that it was invisible until you were literally on top of it. I took another look around to see if I'd missed any other camouflaged homes, but there wasn't a hint of another human in any direction. The Tarahumara prefer to live in such isolation, even from each other, that members of the same village don't like to be close enough to see each other's cook smoke.

I opened my mouth to call out, then shut it. Someone was already there, standing in the dark, watching us. Then Arnulfo Quimare, the most feared of Tarahumara runners, stepped outside.

"*Kuira-há,*" Salvador said in the only words he knew in the Tarahumara language. "We're all one." Arnulfo was looking at me.

"*Kuira-há,*" I repeated.

"*Kuira,*" Arnulfo breathed, his voice as soft as a sigh. He put out his hand for the Tarahumara handshake, a soft sliding of fingertips. Then he vanished back inside. We waited and . . . waited some more. Was that it? There wasn't a whisper from inside the hut, not a sign that he intended to come back out. I edged around the corner to see if he'd slipped out the back. Another Tarahumara man was napping in the shade of the back wall, but there was no sign of Arnulfo.

I shuffled over to Salvador. "Is he coming back?"

"*No sé,*" Salvador said, shrugging. "I don't know. We might have really pissed him off."

"Already? How?"

"We shouldn't have just come up like that." Salvador was kicking himself. He'd gotten overexcited, and violated a key rule of Tarahumara etiquette. Before approaching a Tarahumara cave, you have to take a seat on the ground a few dozen yards away and wait. You then look off in the opposite direction for a while, as if you'd just happened to be wandering by with nothing better to do. If someone

appears and invites you into the cave, great. If not, you get up and go. You do not go walking right up to the entrance, the way Salvador and I had. The Tarahumara like to be visible only if they decide to be; laying eyes on them without invitation was like barging in on someone naked in the bathroom.

Luckily, Arnulfo turned out to be the forgiving type. He returned a few moments later, carrying a basket of sweet limes. We'd turned up at a bad time, he explained; his whole family was down with the flu. That body behind the hut was his big brother, Pedro, who was too coked out with fever to even get up. Still, Arnulfo invited us to rest.

"*Assag,*" he said. Have a seat. We sprawled in whatever shade we could find and began peeling limes, gazing at the tumbling river. As we chomped and spat seeds in the dirt, Arnulfo stared off silently at the water. Every once in a while, he turned and gave me an appraising look. He never asked who we were or why we were there; it seemed like he wanted to figure it out for himself.

I tried not to stare, but it's hard to keep your eyes off a guy as good-looking as Arnulfo. He was brown as polished leather, with whimsical dark eyes that glinted with bemused self-confidence from under the bangs of his black bowl-cut. He reminded me of the early Beatles; *all the early Beatles*, rolled into one shrewd, amused, quietly handsome composite of raw strength. He was dressed in typical Tarahumara garb, a thigh-length skirt and a fiery red tunic as billowy as a pirate's blouse. Every time he moved, the muscles in his legs shifted and re-formed like molten metal.

"You know, we've met," Salvador told him in Spanish. Arnulfo nodded.

Three years in a row, Arnulfo had hiked for days to show up in Guachochi for a sixty-mile race through the canyons. It's an annual all-comers race pitting Tarahumara from throughout the Sierras, plus the rare handful of Mexican runners willing to test their legs and luck against the tribesmen. Three years in a row, Arnulfo won. He took the title from his brother, Pedro, and was followed in second and third by a cousin, Avelado, and his brother-in-law, Silvino.

Silvino was an odd case, a Tarahumara who straddled the line between old and new worlds. Years ago, a Christian Brother who ran

a small Tarahumara school had trekked with Silvino to a marathon somewhere in California. Silvino won, and came home with enough money for an old pickup truck, a pair of jeans, and a new wing for the schoolhouse. Silvino kept his truck at the top of the canyon, occasionally hiking up to drive into Guachochi. But even though he'd found a surefire way to make cash, he'd never returned to race again. When it comes to the rest of the planet, the Tarahumara are living contradictions: they shun outsiders, but are fascinated by the outside world. In one way, it makes sense: when you love running extraordinary distances, it must be tempting to cut loose and see where, and how far, your legs can take you. A Tarahumara man once turned up in Siberia; he'd somehow strayed onto a tramp steamer and vagabonded his way across the Russian steppes before being picked up and shipped back to Mexico. In 1983, a Tarahumara woman in her swirling native skirts was discovered wandering the streets of a town in Kansas; she spent the next twelve years in an insane asylum before a social worker finally realized she was speaking a lost language, not gibberish.

"Would you ever race in the United States?" I asked Arnulfo.

He continued to chomp limes and spit seeds. After a while, he shrugged.

"Are you going to run again in Guachochi?"
Chomp. Chomp. Shrug.

Now I knew what Carl Lumholtz meant about Tarahumara men being so bashful that if it weren't for beer, the tribe would be extinct. "Incredible as it may sound," Lumholtz had marveled, "I do not hesitate to state that in the ordinary course of his existence the uncivilised Tarahumare is too bashful and modest to enforce his matrimonial rights and privileges; and that by means of tsvino chiefly the race is kept alive and increasing." Translation: Tarahumara men couldn't even muster the nerve to get romantic with their own wives if they didn't drown their bashfulness in home brew.

Only later did I find out that I'd thrown my own wrench into the social wheels with big blunder Number 2: Quizzing Him Like a Cop. Arnulfo wasn't being rude with his silence; I was being creepy with my questions. To the Tarahumara, asking direct questions is a show of force, a demand for a possession inside their head. They certainly wouldn't abruptly open up and spill their secrets to a stranger;

strangers were the reason the Tarahumara were hidden down here in the first place. The last time the Tarahumara had been open to the outside world, the outside world had put them in chains and mounted their severed heads on nine-foot poles. Spanish silver hunters had staked their claim to Tarahumara land—and Tarahumara labor—by decapitating their tribal leaders.

"Raramuri men were rounded up like wild broncos and impressed into slave labor in the mines," one chronicler wrote; anyone who resisted was turned into a human horror show. Before dying, the captured Tarahumara were tortured for information. That was all the surviving Tarahumara needed to know about what happens when curious strangers come calling.

The Tarahumara's relationship with the rest of the planet only got worse after that. Wild West bounty hunters were paid one hundred dollars apiece for Apache scalps, but it didn't take long for them to come up with a vicious way to maximize the reward while eliminating the risk; rather than tangling with warriors who'd fight back, they simply massacred the peaceful Tarahumara and cashed in on their look-alike hair.

Good guys were even deadlier than the villains. Jesuit missionaries showed up with Bibles in their hands and influenza in their lungs, promising eternal life but spreading instant death. The Tarahumara had no antibodies to combat the disease, so Spanish flu spread like wildfire, wiping out entire villages in days. A Tarahumara hunter would leave his family for a week in search of game, and come home to find nothing but corpses and flies.

No wonder the Tarahumara's mistrust of strangers had lasted four hundred years and led them here, to a last refuge at the bottom of the earth. It also led to a meat cleaver of a vocabulary when it comes to describing people. In the Tarahumara tongue, humans come in only two forms: there are *Rarimuri*, who run from trouble, and *chabochis*, who cause it. It's a harsh view of the world, but with six bodies a week tumbling into their canyons, it's hard to say they're wrong.

As far as Arnulfo was concerned, he'd met his social obligation with the limes. He'd made sure the travelers were rested and refreshed, then he withdrew into himself the way his people withdrew into the canyons. I could sit there all day and pursue him with all the questions I could think of. But I wasn't going to find him.

CHAPTER 5



they were being chased by demons. Which, they gasped to Ángel when they made it to the schoolhouse, they probably were.

They'd been out herding goats on the mountain, they said, when a weird creature darted through the trees above them. The Creature had the shape of a man, but was taller than any human they'd ever seen. It was deathly pale and bony as a corpse, and had shocks of flame-colored hair jutting out of its skull. It was also naked. For a giant, nude cadaver, the Creature was pretty quick on its feet; it vanished into the brush before the boys could get more than a glimpse. Not that they hung around for more glimpsing. The two boys hightailed it back to the village, wondering who—or *what*?—they'd just seen. After they reached Ángel, though, they began to calm down and catch their breath, and they realized who it was.

"That's the first *chubú* I ever saw," one of the boys said.

"A ghost?" Ángel said. "What makes you think it was a ghost?" By this point, several Raramuri elders had ambled up to see what was going on. The boys repeated their story, describing the Creature's skeletal appearance, its wild shocks of hair, the way it ran along the trail above them. The elders heard the boys out, then set them straight. The canyon shadows could play tricks on anyone's mind, so it was no surprise the boys' imaginations had run a little wild. Still, they shouldn't be allowed to panic the younger kids with wild stories.

"How many legs did it have?" the elders asked.

"Two."

"Did it spit on you?"

"No."

Well, there you had it. "That was no ghost," the elders said. "That was just an *arizwari*."

A soul of the dead; yes, that did make a lot more sense. Ghosts were evil phantoms who traveled by night and galloped around on all fours, killing sheep and spitting in people's faces. Souls of the dead, on the other hand, meant no harm and were just tidyng up loose ends. Even in death, the Tarahumara are fanatics about elusiveness. After they die, their souls hustle around to retrieve any footprints or stray hair the body left behind. The Tarahumara technique for getting a trim was to pull their hair taut in the crotch of a tree and saw it off with a knife, so all those leftover hanks had to be picked up. Once

"YES, YOU'D HAVE to be down here a *looming* time before they'd feel comfortable with you," I was told later that night by Ángel Nava López, who ran the Tarahumara schoolhouse in Muñachi a few miles downriver from the Quimares' hut. "*Años y años*—years and years. Like Caballo Blanco."

"Wait," I interrupted. "Who?"

The White Horse, Ángel explained, was a tall, thin, chalky white man who jabbered his own strange language and would emerge from the hills with no warning, just materializing on the trail and loping on into the settlement. He first appeared ten years before, shortly after lunch on a hot Sunday afternoon. The Tarahumara don't have a written language, let alone written records of weird hominid sightings, but Ángel was dead certain about the day, year, and strangeness of the encounter, because he's the one who did the encountering.

Ángel had been outside at the time, scanning the canyon walls to keep an eye on kids returning to school. His students slept over during the week, then scattered on Friday, climbing high into the mountains to their families' homes. On Sunday, they came traipsing back to school again. Ángel liked to do a head count as they trekked in, which is why he happened to be out in the hot noon sun when two boys came tearing down the mountainside.

The boys hit the river at full speed, churning through as though

the dead soul has erased all signs of its earthbound existence, it can venture on to the afterlife.

"The journey takes three days," the elders reminded the boys. "Four, if it's a woman." So naturally the *ariwárd* is going to look a little bushy, what with all that chopped hair jammed back on its head; and of course it'll be moving top speed, with only a long weekend to knock out a ton of chores. Come to think of it, it was pretty impressive the boys managed to spot the *ariwárd* at all; Tarahumara souls usually run so fast, all you see is swirl of dust sweeping across the countryside. Even in death, the elders reminded the boys, they're still the Running People.

"You're alive because your father can run down a deer. He's alive because his grandfather could outrun an Apache war pony. That's how fast we are when we're weighed down by our *sapá*, our fleshiness. Imagine how you'll fly once you shuck it."

Ángel listened, wondering if he should bother pointing out another possibility. Ángel was an oddity in Muñerachi, a half-Mexican Tarahumara who had actually left the canyon for a while and gone to school in a Mexican village. He still wore traditional Tarahumara sandals and the *koyera* hairband, but unlike the other elders around him, Ángel had on faded work pants instead of a breechcloth. He'd changed on the inside, as well; though he still worshipped the Tarahumara gods, he had to wonder if this Wild Thing in the Wilderness wasn't just a *chabochi* who'd wandered in from the outside world.

Granted, it was probably even more of a long shot than sharing the trail with a traveling spirit. No one ever penetrated this far unless they had a very good reason. Maybe he was a fugitive hiding from the law? A mystic seeking visions? A gold-digger driven mad by the heat? Ángel shrugged. A lone *chabochi* could be any of the above, and still not be the first of his kind to surface in Tarahumara territory. It's a natural law (or supernatural, if you're so inclined) that weird things appear where people tend to disappear. African jungles, Pacific islands, Himalayan wastelands—wherever expeditionary parties go missing, that's where lost species, Stonehengey stone idols, the flitting shadows of yetis, and ancient, unsurrendering Japanese soldiers are sure to pop up.

The Copper Canyons are no different, and in some regards, considerably worse. The Sierra Madres are the middle link of a mountain chain that stretches practically uninterrupted from Alaska to Patagonia. A desperado with a knack for backcountry navigation could hold up a bank in Colorado and slink to safety in the Copper Canyons, darting across desolate passes and desert ranges without coming within ten miles of the next human being.

As the best open-air safe house on the continent, consequently, the Copper Canyons not only spawn bizarre beings but also attract them. Over the past hundred years, the canyons have played host to just about every stripe of North American misfit: bandits, mystics, murderers, man-eating jaguars, Comanche warriors, Apache marauders, paranoid prospectors, and Pancho Villa's rebels have all shaken pursuit by slipping into the Barrancas.

Geronimo used to skeedaddle into the Copper Canyons when he was on the run from the U.S. Cavalry. So did his protégé, the Apache Kid, who "moved like a ghost in the desert," as one chronicler put it. "He followed no pattern. No one knew where he would show up next. It was unnerving to work cattle or mine a claim when every shadow, every slight noise, could be the Apache Kid closing in for the kill. One worried settler said it best: 'Usually, by the time you saw the Apache Kid it was entirely too late.'"

Pursuing them into the maze meant running the risk of never finding a way back out again. "To look at this country is grand; to travel in it, is Hell," a U.S. Cavalry captain named John Bourke wrote after barely surviving another unsuccessful pursuit of Geronimo into the Copper Canyons. The click of a tumbling pebble would echo around crazily, getting louder and louder rather than fainter, the sound bouncing from right, to left, to overhead. The rasp of two juniper branches would have an entire company of cavalrymen yanking out their pistols, their own shadows contorting monstrously against the stone walls as they searched wildly in all directions.

More than just echoes and jumpy imaginations made the Copper Canyons seem haunted; one torment could transform into another so quickly, it was hard not to believe the Barrancas were guarded by some wrathful spirit with a sadistic sense of humor. After days of baking under a merciless sun, soldiers would welcome the relief of a few dark clouds. Within minutes, they'd be trapped in a surge of floodwater as powerful as a fire hose, scrambling desperately to escape up

the slippery rock walls. That's exactly how another Apache rebel named Massai once wiped out an entire cavalry squad: "By bringing them into a shallow gorge just in time to be swept away by a mountain cloudburst."

The Barrancas were so treacherous, even a quick sip of fresh water could kill you. The Apache chief Victorio used to lead U.S. Cavalry troops on a cat-and-mouse chase deep into the canyons, then lie in wait by the only water hole. The cavalrymen must have known he'd be there, but couldn't help themselves. Lost and crazed by the heat, they would rather risk a quick bullet in the head than a slow choking from a thirst-thickened tongue.

Not even the two toughest hombres in U.S. military history were any match for the Barrancas. When Pancho Villa's forces attacked a town in New Mexico in 1916, President Woodrow Wilson personally directed both Black Jack Pershing and George Patton to haul him out of his Copper Canyon lair. Ten years later, the Jaguar was still on the loose. Even with the full might of the U.S. armed forces at their disposal, Patton and Pershing had to be bewildered by ten thousand miles of raw wilderness, with their only possible information source, the Tarahumara, disappearing at the sound of a sneeze. The result: Black Jack and Old Blood and Guts could whip the Germans in two world wars, but surrendered to the Copper Canyons.

Over time, the Mexican *federales* learned to take a more careful-what-you-wish-for strategy. What was hell for pursuers, they realized, couldn't be a whole lot nicer for the pursued. Whatever happened to the fugitives in there—starvation, jaguar attack, dementia, a life sentence of voluntary solitary confinement—was probably more ghastly than anything the Mexican court system would have meted out. So, often as not, the *federales* would rein in their horses and allow any bandit who reached the canyons to try his luck in the prison of his own making.

Many adventurers who slunk in never slunk back out again, giving the canyons their reputation as the Bermuda Triangle of the borderlands. The Apache Kid and Massai galloped over Skeleton Pass into the Copper Canyons one last time and were never seen again. Ambrose Bierce, the celebrity newspaper columnist and author of the satiric hit *The Devil's Dictionary*, was reportedly en route to a ren-

dezvous with Pancho Villa in 1914 when he strayed into the Copper Canyons' gravitational pull and was never seen again. Imagine Anderson Cooper vanishing on assignment for CNN, and you get the sense of the search that was launched for Bierce. But no trace was ever found.

Did the lost souls of the canyons suffer a terrible fate, or wreak terrible fates on each other? No one knows. In the old days, they'd be killed off by mountain lions, scorpions, coral snakes, thirst, cold, hunger, or canyon fever, and you could now add a sniper's bullet to that list. Ever since the drug cartels had moved into the Copper Canyons, they'd guarded their crops through telescopic scopes powerful enough to see a leaf quiver from miles away.

Which made Ángel wonder if he'd ever see the Creature at all. A lot of things could kill him out there, and probably would. If the Creature didn't know enough to keep his distance from the marijuana fields, he wouldn't even hear the shot that took off his head.

"*Hoooooooolaaaaaa! ¡Amigooooooos!*"

The mystery of the lone wanderer was solved even sooner than Ángel had expected. He was still squinting into the sun, watching out for returning schoolkids, when he heard an echoing yodel and spotted a naked guy waving and running down the trail toward the river.

On closer inspection, the Creature wasn't entirely naked. He wasn't exactly dressed either, certainly not by Tarahumara standards. For a people who prefer not to be seen, the Tarahumara always look fantastic. The men wear bright blouses over a long white cloth bound around the groin and left hanging, skirtlike, in the front and rear. They cinch it all together with a rainbow-colored sash, and accessorize with a matching headband. Tarahumara women are even more magnificent, wearing brilliantly colored skirts and matching blouses, their lovely umber skin highlighted by coral-colored stone necklaces and bracelets. No matter what kind of fancy hiking duds you've got on, you're guaranteed to feel underdressed among the Tarahumara.

Even by sun-crazed-prospector standards, the Creature was seriously shabby. He only had on some dirt-colored *chabochi* shorts, a pair of sandals, and an old baseball cap. That was it. No backpack, no

shirt, and apparently no food, because as soon as he reached Ángel, he asked in awkward Spanish for *agua* and made shoveling gestures toward his mouth—maybe he could have something to eat?

“*Assag*,” Ángel told him in Tarahumara, gesturing for him to sit. Someone produced a cup of *pimole*, the Tarahumara corn gruel. The stranger slurped it down hungrily. Between gulps, he tried to communicate. He pumped his arms and let his tongue loll like a panting dog.

“*¿Corriendo?*” the teacher asked. You’ve been running? The Creature nodded. “*Todo día*,” he said in pidgin Spanish. “All day.”

“*¿Por qué?*” Ángel asked. “*¿Y a dónde?*” Why? And where to?

The Creature launched into a long tale, which Ángel found highly entertaining as performance art but barely intelligible as narrative. From what Ángel could make out, the lone wanderer was either totally nuts or not so lone after all; he claimed to have an even more mysterious sidekick, some kind of Apache warrior he called Ramón Chingón—“Ray, the Mean Motherfucker.”

“*¿Y tú?*” Ángel asked. “What’s your name?”

“Caballo Blanco,” he said. The White Horse.

“*Pues, bueno*,” the teacher said, shrugging. Good enough.

The White Horse didn’t linger; once he’d gulped some water and a second cup of *pimole*, he waved good-bye and went trotting back up the trail. He stomped and shrieked like a wild stallion as he went, amusing the kids, who laughed and chased at his heels until he disappeared, once again, back into the wild.

“*Caballo Blanco es muy amable*,” Ángel said, concluding his story, “*pero un poco raro*.” The White Horse is a good guy, in other words, if you like ‘em a little loony.

“So you think he’s still out there?” I asked.

“Hombre, *claro*,” Ángel said. “He was here yesterday. I gave him a drink with that cup.”

I looked around. There was no cup.

“The cup was there, too,” Ángel insisted.

From what Ángel had picked up over the years, Caballo lived in a hut he’d built himself somewhere across the Batopilas mountain. Whenever he turned up at Ángel’s school, he arrived with just the

sandals on his feet, the shirt on his back (if that), and a bag of dry pinole hanging from his waist, like the Tarahumara. He seemed to live off the land when he ran, depending on *korima*, the cornerstone of Tarahumara culture.

Korima sounds like karma and functions the same way, except in the here and now. It’s your obligation to share whatever you can spare, instantly and with no expectations: once the gift leaves your hand, it was never yours to begin with. The Tarahumara have no monetary system, so *korima* is how they do business: their economy is based on trading favors and the occasional cauldron of corn beer.

The White Horse looked and dressed and sounded nothing like the Tarahumara, but in a deeper way, he was one of them. Ángel had heard of Tarahumara runners who used the Horse’s hut as a way station during long journeys through the canyons. The Horse, in return, was always welcome to a meal and a place to rest when he came roaming through Ángel’s village on his rambling runs.

Ángel waved his arm, a brusque sweep of his arm out thataway—beyond the river and the canyon top, toward non-Tarahumara country whence no good can come.

“There’s a village called Mesa de la Yerbabuena,” he said. “Do you know it, Salvador?”

“Mm-hm,” Salvador murmured.

“Do you know what happened to it?”

“Mm-HM,” Salvador replied, his inflection conveying *Hell, yeah*.

“Many of the best runners were from Yerbabuena,” Ángel said. “They had a very good trail which would let them cover a lot of distance in a day, much farther than you could get to from here.”

Unfortunately, the trail was so good that the Mexican government eventually decided to slick it with asphalt and turn it into a road. Trucks began showing up in Yerbabuena, and in them, foods the Tarahumara had rarely eaten—soda, chocolate, rice, sugar, butter, flour. The people of Yerbabuena developed a taste for starch and treats, but they needed money to buy them, so instead of working their own fields, they began hitching rides to Guachochi, where they worked as dishwashers and day laborers, or selling junk crafts at the train station in Divisadero.

“That was twenty years ago,” Ángel said. “Now, there are no runners in Yerbabuena.”

CHAPTER 6

The Yerbabuena story really scares Ángel, because now there's talk that the government has found a way to run a road along the canyon floor and right into this settlement. Why they would put a road in here, Ángel doesn't have a clue; the Tarahumara don't want it, and they're the only ones who live here. Only drug lords and illegal loggers benefit from Copper Canyon roads, which makes the Mexican government's obsession with backcountry road-building rather bewildering—or, considering how many soldiers and politicians are linked to the drug trade, rather not.

"That's exactly what Lumholz was afraid would happen," I thought to myself. A century ago, the farseeing explorer was already warning that the Tarahumara were in danger of disappearing.

"Future generations will not find any other record of the Tarahumares than what scientists of the present age can elicit from the lips of the people and from the study of their implements and customs," he predicted. "They stand out to-day as an interesting relic of a time long gone by; as a representative of one of the most important stages in the development of the human race; as one of those wonderful primitive tribes that were the founders and makers of the history of mankind."

"There are Rarámuri who don't respect our traditions as much as Caballo Blanco," Ángel lamented. "*Ej Caballo sabe*—the Horse gets it."

I slumped against the wall of Ángel's schoolhouse, my legs twitching and head pounding from exhaustion. It had been grueling enough to get this far, and now it looked like the hunt had just begun.

"WHAT A CON JOB."

Salvador and I set off the next morning, racing the sun to the rim of the canyon. Salvador set a brutal pace, often ignoring switchbacks and using his hands to scrabble straight up the cliff face like a convict scaling a prison wall. I did my best to keep up, despite my growing certainty that we'd just been tricked.

The farther we left Ángel's village behind, the more the idea nagged that the weird White Horse story was a last line of defense against outsiders who came nosing around in search of Tarahumara secrets. Like all great cons, the story of a Lone Wanderer of the High Sierras teetered between perfect and implausible; the news that there was a modern-world disciple of the ancient Tarahumara arts was better than I could have hoped for, which made it too good to believe.

The White Horse seemed more myth than man, making me think that Ángel had gotten tired of my questions, dreamed up a decoy, and pointed us toward the horizon knowing we'd be hundreds of hard miles away before we wised up.

I wasn't being paranoid; it wouldn't be the first time a tall tale had been used to blow a smokescreen around the Running People. Carlos Castaneda, author of the wildly popular *Don Juan* books of the '60s, was almost unquestionably referring to the Tarahumara when he described magical Mexican shamans with astonishing wisdom and endurance. But in an apparent twinge of compassion, Castaneda

deliberately misidentified the tribe as the Yaquis. Castaneda apparently felt that, in the event that his books launched an invasion of peyote-hungry hippies, the badass Yaquis could hold their own a lot better than the gentle Tarahumara.

But despite my suspicion that I'd just been Castanedaed, one odd incident helped spur me to stay on the hunt. Ángel had let us spend the night in the only room he had free, a tiny mud-brick hut used as the school's infirmary. The next morning, he kindly invited us to join him for a breakfast of beans and hand-patted corn tortillas before we set off. It was a frosty morning, and as we sat outside, warming our hands around the steaming bowls, a torrent of kids came swarming past us out of the schoolhouse. Rather than having the cold kids suffer in their seats, the teacher cut them loose to warm up Tarahumara-style—meaning I'd lucked into a chance to witness a *rarájipari*, the Tarahumara running game.

Ángel pulled himself to his feet and divided the kids into two teams, girls and boys together. He then produced two wooden balls, each about the size of a baseball, and flipped one to a player on each team. He held up six fingers; they'd be running six laps from the schoolhouse to the river, a total distance of about four miles. The two boys dropped the balls into the dust and arched one of their feet, so the ball was balanced on top of their toes. Slowly, they coiled themselves down into a crouch and . . .

Vayan! Go!

The balls whistled past us, flip-kicked off the boys' feet like they'd been fired out of a bazooka, and the kids went stampeding after them down the trail. The teams looked pretty evenly matched, but my pesos were on the gang led by Marcelino, a twelve-year-old who looked like the Human Torch; his bright red shirt flowed behind him like flames and his white skirt whipped his legs like a trail of smoke. The Torch caught up with his team's ball while it was still rolling. He wedged it expertly against the front of his toes and zinged it down the trail with barely a hitch in his stride.

Marcelino's running was so amazing, it was hard to take it all in at once. His feet were jitterbugging like crazy between the rocks, but everything above his legs was tranquil, almost immobile. Seeing him from the waist up, you'd think he was gliding along on skates. With his chin high and his black hair streaming off his forehead, he looked

as if he'd burst straight out of the Steve Prefontaine poster on the bedroom wall of every high school track star in America. I felt as if I'd discovered the Future of American Running, living five hundred years in the past. A kid that talented and handsome was born to have his face on a cereal box.

"*Sí, de acuerdo,*" Ángel said. Yes, I hear you. "It's in his blood. His father is a great champion."

Marcelino's father, Manuel Luna, could beat just about anyone at an all-night *rarájipari*, the grown-ups' version of the game I was watching. The real *rarájipari* was the heart and soul of Tarahumara culture, Ángel explained; everything that made the Tarahumara unique was on display during the heat of a *rarájipari*.

First, two villages would get together and spend the night making bets and pounding *tesgüino*, a homemade corn beer that could blister paint. Come sunup, the villages' two teams would face off, with somewhere between three and eight runners on each side. The runners would race back and forth over a long strip of trail, advancing their ball like soccer players on a fast break. The race could go on for twenty-four hours, even forty-eight, whatever had been agreed to the night before, but the runners could never zone out or relax into an easy rhythm; with the ball ricochetting around and up to thirty-two fast-moving legs on all sides, the runners had to be constantly on their toes as they surged, veered, and zigzagged.

"We say the *rarájipari* is the game of life," Ángel said. "You never know how hard it will be. You never know when it will end. You can't control it. You can only adjust."

And, he added, no one gets through it on their own. Even a superstar like Manuel Luna couldn't win without a village behind him. Friends and family fueled the racers with cups of *pimole*. Come nightfall, the villagers spark up sticks of *acate*, sap-rich pine branches, and the runners race through the dark by torchlight. To endure a challenge like that, you had to possess all the Tarahumara virtues—strength, patience, cooperation, dedication, and persistence. Most of all, you had to love to run.

"That one's going to be as good as his father," Ángel said, nodding toward Marcelino. "If I let him, he'd go like that all day."

Once Marcelino reached the river, he wheeled around and drilled the ball to a little six-year-old who'd lost one sandal and was strug-

gling with his belt. For a few glorious moments, Little One-Shoe was leading his team and loving it, hopping on one bare foot while grappling to keep his skirt from falling off. That's when I began to glimpse the real genius of the *narijipari*. Because of gnarly trails and back-and-forth laps, the game is endlessly and instantly self-handicapping; the ball ricocheted around as if it were coming off a pinball paddle, allowing the slower kids to catch up whenever Marcelino had to root it out of a crevice. The playing field levels the playing field, so everyone is challenged and no one is left out. The boys and girls were all hurtling up and down the hilly trail, but no one really seemed to care who won; there was no arguing, no showboating, and, most noticeably, no coaching. Ángel and the schoolteacher were watching happily and with intense interest, but not yelling advice. They weren't even cheering. The kids accelerated when they felt frisky, downshifted when they didn't, and caught an occasional breather under a shady tree when they overdid it and started sucking wind.

But unlike most of the other players, Marcelino never seemed to slow. He was tireless, flowing uphill as lightly as he coasted down, his legs scissoring in a surprisingly short, mincing stride that somehow still looked smooth, not choppy. He was on the tall side for a Tarahumara boy, and had the same thrill-of-the-game grin that always used to creep across Michael Jordan's face as the clock was ticking down. On his team's final lap, Marcelino fired a bank shot off a big rock to the left, calculated the ricochet, and was in position to receive his own pass, picking the ball up on the fly and covering fifty yards in a matter of seconds over a trail as rocky as a riverbed.

Ángel banged on an iron bar with the back of a hatchet. Game over. The kids begin filing back inside the schoolhouse, the older ones carrying wood for the school's open fireplace. Few returned our greeting; many had only heard their first words of Spanish the day they started school. Marcelino, however, stepped out of line and came over. Ángel had told him what we were up to.

"*Que vayan bien,*" Marcelino said. Good luck with your trip. "Caballo Blanco es *muy norawa de mi papá.*"

Norawa? I'd never heard the word before. "What's he mean?" I asked Salvador. "Caballo is a legend his dad knows? Some kind of story he tells?"

"No," Salvador said. "*Norawa* means *amigo.*"

"Caballo Blanco is good *friends* with your dad?" I asked.

"Sí," Marcelino nodded, before disappearing inside the schoolhouse. "He's a really good guy."

Okay, I thought later that afternoon. Maybe Ángel would buffalo us, but I gotta trust the Torch. Ángel told us Caballo might be heading to the town of Creel, but we had to hurry: if we didn't catch him, there was no telling where he'd turn up next. The Horse would often vanish for months at a time; no one knew where he went or when he'd be back. Miss him, and we might not get another chance.

And Ángel sure hadn't lied about one thing, as I was discovering by the surprising strength in my legs: just before we began our long climb out of the canyon, he'd handed me a dented tin cup full of something he promised would help.

"You'll like this," he assured me.

I peered inside. The cup was full of gooey slime that looked like rice pudding without the rice, lots of black-flecked bubbles I was pretty sure were frog eggs in midhatch. If I were anywhere else, I'd think it was a gag; it looked exactly like a kid had scooped the scum out of his aquarium to see if he could trick me into tasting it. Best guess, it was some kind of fermented root mixed with river water—meaning if the taste didn't make me hurl, the bacteria would. "Great," I said, looking around for a cactus I could dump it behind. "What is it?"

"*Iskiate.*"

That sounded familiar . . . and then I remembered. The indomitable Lumholtz had once staggered into a Tarahumara home looking for food while he was in the middle of a grueling expedition. Looming ahead was a mountain he had to summit by nightfall. Lumholtz was exhausted and despairing; there was no way he had the strength left for the climb.

"I arrived late one afternoon at a cave where a woman was just making this drink," Lumholtz later wrote. "I was very tired and at a loss how to climb the mountain-side to my camp, some two thousand feet above. But after having satisfied my hunger and thirst with some *iskiate*," he went on, "I at once felt new strength, and, to my own astonishment, climbed the great height without much effort. After

this I always found *iskiate* a friend in need, so strengthening and refreshing that I may almost claim it as a discovery."

Home-brewed Red Bull! Now this I had to try. "I'll save it for later," I told Ángel. I poured the *iskiate* into a hip bottle that was half full of water I'd purified with iodine pills, then tossed in a couple of extra pills for good measure. I was dog tired, but unlike Lumholtz, I wasn't desperate enough to risk a yearlong bout of chronic diarrhea from waterborne bacteria.

Months later, I'd learn that *iskiate* is otherwise known as *chia fresca*—"chilly chia." It's brewed up by dissolving *chia* seeds in water with a little sugar and a squirt of lime. In terms of nutritional content, a tablespoon of *chia* is like a smoothie made from salmon, spinach, and human growth hormone. As tiny as those seeds are, they're superpacked with omega-3s, protein, calcium, iron, zinc, fiber, and antioxidants. If you had to pick just one desert-island food, you couldn't do much better than *chia*, at least if you were interested in building muscle, lowering cholesterol, and reducing your risk of heart disease; after a few months on the *chia* diet, you could probably swim home. *Chia* was once so treasured, the Aztecs used to deliver it to their king in homage. Aztec runners used to chomp *chia* seeds as they went into battle, and the Hopis fueled themselves on *chia* during their epic runs from Arizona to the Pacific Ocean. The Mexican state of Chiapas is actually named after the seed; it used to rank right up there with corn and beans as a cash crop. Despite its liquid-gold status, *chia* is ridiculously easy to grow; if you own a Chia Pet, in fact, you're only a few steps away from your own batch of devil drink.

And a damn tasty devil drink at that, as I discovered once the iodine had melted enough to risk a few swigs. Even with the medicinal after-bite from the pills, the *iskiate* went down like fruit punch with a nice limey tang. Maybe the excitement of the hunt had something to do with it, but within minutes, I felt fantastic. Even the low-throbbing headache I'd had all morning from sleeping on a frosty dirt floor the night before had vanished.

Salvador kept pushing us hard, racing daylight to the canyon rim. We almost made it, too. But when we had a good two hours' worth of climbing still ahead, the sun vanished, plunging the canyon into darkness so deep that all I could make out were varying shades of black. We debated rolling out our sleeping bags and camping right

there for the night, but we'd run out of food and water over an hour earlier and the temperature was dropping below freezing. If we could just feel our way up another mile, we might catch enough light above the rim to make it out. We decided to go for it; I hated the idea of shivering all night on a sliver of trail on the edge of a cliff.

It was so dark, I could only follow Salvador by the crunch of his boots. How he was finding the turns on those steep switchbacks without straying over the edge, I didn't really want to know. But he'd proven me wrong with his psychic navigation when he was driving us through the woods, so I owed it to him to shut up, pay careful attention to his every move, and . . . and . . .

"Wait. What happened to the crunching?"

"Salvador?"

Nothing. Shit.

"*Salvador!*!"

"*No pases por aquí!*" he called from somewhere ahead of me. Don't go this way!

"What's the prob—"

"*Calla.*" Shut up.

I *callada* and stood in the dark, wondering what the hell was wrong. Minutes passed. Not a sound from Salvador. "He'll be back," I told myself. "He would have screamed if he had fallen. You'd have heard something. A crash. Something. But damn, he's taking a long—"

"*Bueno.*" A shout came from somewhere above me and off to the right. "Good here. But go slow!" I twisted toward the sound of his voice and slowly inched along. To my left, I felt the ground drop abruptly away. How close Salvador had come to stepping into empty air, I didn't want to know.

By ten that night, we'd made it to the rim of the cliff and crawled into our bags, chilled to the bone and just as weary. The next morning, we were up before the sun and fast-hiking back to the truck. By the time dawn broke, we were already well on the bouncing, meandering, word-of-mouth trail of the White Horse.

Every time we came to a farm or tiny village, we hit the brakes and asked if anyone knew Caballo Blanco. Everywhere—in the village of Samachique, at the schoolhouse in Huisichi—we heard the same

thing: *Sí*, of course! He passed through last week... a few days ago... yesterday... You just missed him... .

We came to a little cluster of ramshackle cabins and stopped for food. “*Abhh, ten cuidado con ese*,” the old woman behind the counter of a roadside stand said as she passed me a dust-covered bag of chips and a warm Coke with her thin, trembly hands. “Be careful with that one. I heard about that Caballo. He was a fighter who went loco. A man died, and he went loco. He can kill you with his hands. And,” she added, in case I’d forgotten, “he’s loco.”

The last place he’d been spotted was the old mining town of Creel, where a woman in a taco stand told us she’d seen him that very morning, walking the train tracks toward the edge of town. We followed the tracks to the end of the line, asking all the way, until we reached the final building: the Casa Pérez hotel. Where, I was both thrilled and nervous to hear, he was supposed to be at that moment.

Maybe it was a good thing I fell asleep on the corner sofa. That way, at least, I was hidden in the shadows and managed to get a good look at the lone wanderer—before he saw me, and bolted right back into the wild.

LUCKILY, I WAS closer to the door.

“Hey! Uh, do you know Ángel?” I stammered as I stepped between Caballo and his only way out. “The teacher at the Tarahumara school? And Esidro in Huisichi? And, um, Luna, Miguel Luna . . .” I kept shotgunning names, hoping he’d hear one he recognized before body-slammimg me against the wall and escaping into the hills behind the hotel. “ . . . No, *Manuel*. Not Miguel Luna. Manuel. His son said you guys were friends. Marcelino? You know Marcelino?”

But the more I talked, the more his scowl deepened, until it looked downright menacing. I snapped my mouth shut. I’d learned my lesson after the Debacle at the Quimare Compound; maybe he’d cool out if I kept quiet and gave him a chance to size me up on his own. I stood silently while he squinted, suspicious and scornful, from under the brim of his straw campesino’s hat.

“Yeah,” he grunted. “Manuel is an amigo. Who the hell are you?” Since I didn’t really know what was making him skittish, I started with who I wasn’t. I wasn’t a cop or a DEA agent, I told him. I was just a writer and busted-up runner who wanted to learn the secrets of the Tarahumara. If he was a fugitive, that was his own business. If anything, it boosted his credibility: anyone who could dodge the law for all these years with no getaway vehicle except his own two legs had sure made his bones as a wannabe Raramuri. I could set aside my

obligations to justice long enough to hear what had to be the escape tale of a lifetime.

Caballo's scowl didn't fade—but he didn't try to get around me, either. Only later would I discover that I'd gotten extraordinarily lucky and stumbled across him at a strange time in his very strange life: in his own way, Caballo Blanco was looking for me, too.

"Okay, man," he said. "But I've got to get some beans."

He led me out of the hotel and down a dusty alley to a small, unmarked door. We stepped over a little boy playing with a kitten on the doorstep and right into a tiny living room. An old woman looked up from an ancient gas stove in an adjoining alcove, where she was stirring a fragrant pot of frijoles.

"*Hola, Caballo,*" she called.

"*¿Cómo está, Mamá?*" Caballo Blanco called back. We took seats at a rickety wooden table in the living room. He's got "*mamás*" all over the canyons, he said, little old ladies who'd fill him up on beans and tortillas for only a few centavos during his rambling vagabond runs.

Despite Mamá's nonchalance, I could see why the Tarahumara were spooked when Caballo first came whisking through their woods. Fantastic feats of endurance under an unforgiving sun have left Caballo a little on the savage side. He's well over six feet tall, with naturally fair skin that has weathered into shades ranging from pink on his nose to walnut on his neck. He's so long-limbed and lean-muscled, he looks like the endoskeleton of a bulkier beast; melt the Terminator in a cauldron of acid, and Caballo Blanco is what comes out.

The desert glare had scrunched his eyes into a permanent squint, leaving his face capable of only two expressions: skepticism or amusement. No matter what I said for the rest of the night, I could never tell if he thought I was hilarious or full of shit. When Caballo turns his attention on you, he locks in hard; he listens as attentively as a hunter tracking game, seeming to get as much from the warbles of your voice as from the meaning of your words. Oddly, though, he still has an abominable ear for accents—after more than a decade in Mexico, his Spanish clanged so badly it sounded as if he were sounding it out from phonics cards.

"What freaked me out about you—," Caballo began, but suddenly stopped, bug-eyed with hunger, as Mamá plopped big bowls in front

of us and futed over them with chopped cilantro and jalapeños and squirts of lime. The snarling look he'd given me back at the hotel wasn't because I was standing between him and freedom; it was because I was standing between him and food. Caballo had set out that morning for a short hike to a natural thermal pool in the woods, but once he spotted a faint trail through the trees he'd never seen before, hike and hot tub were history. He took off running, and was still going hours later. He hit a mountain, but instead of turning back, he bent himself into a three-thousand-foot ascent, the equivalent of climbing to the top of the Empire State Building twice. Eventually, he linked onto a path back into Creel, turning what should have been a relaxing soak into a grueling trail marathon. By the time I shanghaied him in the hotel, he hadn't eaten since sunup and was nearly delirious with hunger.

"I'm always getting lost and having to vertical-climb, water bottle between my teeth, buzzards circling over head," he said. "It's a beautiful thing." One of the first and most important lessons he learned from the Tarahumara was the ability to break into a run anytime, the way a wolf would if it suddenly sniffed a hare. To Caballo, running has become as much of a first option in transportation as driving is to suburbanites; everywhere he goes, he goes at a lope, setting off as lightly equipped as a Neolithic hunter and with just as little concern about where—or how far away—he'll end up.

"Look," he said, pointing to his ancient hiking shorts and Dumpster-ready pair of Teva sandals. "That's all I wear, and I'm always wearing them."

He paused to shovel steaming mounds of spicy beans into his mouth, washing them down with long, thirsty pulls on a bottle of Tecate. Caballo polished off one bowl and was refilled by Mamá so quickly that he barely slowed his spoon, moving his hand from bowl to mouth to beer bottle with such ergonomic efficiency that dinner seemed less like the end of his long workout and more like its next phase. Listening to him from across the table was like listening to gas pumping into the tank of a car: *scoop, chomp, gurgle, gurgle, scoop, chomp, gurgle...*

Every once in a while, he'd lift his head and deliver a brief torrent of storytelling, then dip back down to his bowl. "Yeah, I used to be a fighter, man, ranked fifth in the world." Back to the spoonwork.

"What freaked me out was, you just came blaring at me out of nowhere. We've had kidnappings and murders down here. Drug nastiness. Guy I know was kidnapped, wife paid a big ransom, then they killed him anyway. Nasty stuff. Good thing I got nothing. I'm just a gringo Indio, man, running humbly with the Rarámuri."

"Sorry—," I began, but his face was already back in the beans.

I didn't want to bug Caballo with questions just yet, even though listening to him was like watching an art-house film in fast forward; traumas, jokes, fantasies, flashbacks, grudges, guilt over grudges, tantalizing fragments of ancient wisdom—they all came calliope-ing past in a blur too quick and disjointed to catch. He'd tell a story, move on to the next, skip ahead to the third, go back and correct a detail in the first, gripe about the guy in the second, then apologize for griping because, man, he'd spent his life trying to control his anger, and *that* was another story altogether....

His name was Micah True, he said, and he came from Colorado. Well, California, actually. And if I really wanted to understand the Rarámuri, I should have been there when this ninety-five-year-old man came hiking twenty-five miles over the mountain. Know why he could do it? Because no one ever told him he couldn't. No one ever told him he oughta be off dying somewhere in an old age home. You live up to your own expectations, man. Like when he named himself after his dog. That's where the name "True" really came from, his old dog. He didn't always measure up to good old True Dog, but *that* was another story, too....

I waited, scraping at the label of my beer bottle with a fingernail, wondering if he'd ever simmer down enough for me to figure out what the hell he was talking about. Gradually, Caballo's spoonwork slowed and came to a stop. He drained his second bottle of Tecate and sat back, satisfied.

"Guadajuko?" he said with a toothy grin. "Good word to learn. That's Rarámuri for 'cool.'"

I pushed a third Tecate across the table. He eyed it with that skeptical, sun-scorched squint. "I don't know, man," he said. "Not eating all day, I can't hold it like the Rarámuri."

But he picked it up and took a sip. Thirsty work, rambling up sky-scraping mesas. He took a long, chugging pull, then relaxed way back in his chair, tipping the front legs up and lacing his fingers across his

lean belly. Something had just clicked inside him; I could tell before he even said another word. Maybe he needed those last twelve ounces of beer to loosen up, or maybe he'd just had to blow out some pent-up steam before relaxing into his story.

Because when Caballo started to talk this time, he kept me spell-bound. He talked deep into the night, telling an amazing story that spanned the ten years since his disappearance from the outside world and was full of bizarre characters, amazing adventures, and furious fights. And, in the end, a plan. An audacious plan.

A plan, I gradually realized, that involved me.

CHAPTER 8



list was his amazing internal GPS; Fisher was like one of those house cats who reappear at home in Wichita after getting lost on a family vacation in Alaska. His ability to sniff his way through the most bewildering canyons may be unrivaled on the planet, and it appears to be mostly raw instinct. Fisher had never seen anything deeper than a ditch before leaving the midwest for the University of Arizona, but once there, he immediately began plunging into places better left unplunged. He was still a student when he began exploring Arizona's mazelike Mogollon range, venturing in just after the head of Phoenix's Sierra Club was killed there in a not-uncommon flash flood. Fisher, with zero experience and Boy Scout-grade gear, not only survived, but came back with breathtaking photos of an underground wonderland.

Even Jon Krakauer, the adventure überexpert and author of *Into Thin Air*, was impressed. "Rick Fisher can fairly lay claim to being the world's leading authority on the Mogollon canyons and the myriad secrets they contain," Krakauer concluded early in Fisher's career, after Fisher had led him to "an utterly spellbinding slice of earth, like no place I'd even seen"—a Willy Wonka world of lime-green pools and pink crystal towers and subterranean waterfalls.

Which brings up Rick Fisher's other skill set: when it comes to grabbing a spotlight and persuading people to do things they'd rather not, Fisher could put a televangelist to shame (well, as much as that's possible). Take this classic Fish tale that Krakauer tells about a rafting trip Fisher made into the Copper Canyons in the mid-1980s. Fisher really didn't know where he was going, even though he was attempting, by Krakauer's estimation, "the canyoneering equivalent of a major mountaineering expedition in the Himalaya." Yet he still managed to convince two pals—a guy and his girlfriend—to come along. Everything was going grand . . . until Fisher accidentally beached the raft next to a marijuana field. Suddenly, a drug sentinel popped up with a cocked assault rifle.

No problem. Fisher just whipped out a packet of news articles about himself he carries everywhere he goes (yup, even on very wet rafts through non-English-speaking Mexican badlands). See! You don't want to mess with me. *I'm, ub, whatchacallit—importante!* ¡*Muy importante!*

TO APPRECIATE Caballo's vision, you have to go back to the early '90s, when a wilderness photographer from Arizona named Rick Fisher was asking himself the obvious question: if the Tarahumara were the world's toughest runners, why weren't they ripping up the world's toughest races? Maybe it was time they met the Fisher-man.

Total score all around, the way Fisher saw it. Some spit-chaw towns bag a ton of TV for their oddball races, the Fisherman turns into the Crocodile Hunter of Lost Tribes, and the Tarahumara get primo PR and become media sweethearts. Okay, so the Tarahumara are the most publicity-shy people on the planet and have spent centuries *feeling* any kind of relations with the public, but . . .

Well, Fisher would have to deal with that speed bump later; he already had far stickier problems to handle. Like, he didn't know jack about running and barely spoke a lick of Spanish, let alone Rarámuri. He had no idea where to find Tarahumara runners, and no clue how he'd persuade them to follow him out of the safety of their caves and up into the lair of the Bearded Devils. And those were only the minor details: assuming he did assemble an all-Tarahumara track team, how the hell was he going to get them out of the canyons without cars and into America without passports?

Luckily, Fisher had some special talents going for him. Top of the

The bewildered sentinel let them paddle on, only to have Fisher come to shore at *another* drug encampment. This time, it got really ugly. Fisher's little band was surrounded by a band of thugs who—being womanless in the wilderness—were drunk and dangerously lusty. One of the thugs grabbed the American woman. When her boyfriend tried to pull her back, a rifle barrel was slammed into his chest.

That did it for Fisher. No fanning out his scrapbook this time; instead, he went berserk. "You're *muy malas hombres!*" he screamed in an absolute spitting fury, calling the thugs "naughty men" in his junior-high Spanish. "*Muy, muy malos!*" He kept screeching and raving until, as Krakauer tells it, the thugs finally silenced the shrill lunatic by shoving him aside and walking away. Fisher had just brazened his way out of a death sentence—and, naturally, he made sure that the journalist Krakauer heard about it.

Fisher loved the sound of his own horn, no doubt about it, and that spurred him to keep finding reasons to toot it. While most wild-men in the '80s were pushing skyward, racing Reinhold Messner to scale the fourteen highest peaks in the Himalayas, Rick Fisher was burrowing down to more exotic kingdoms right beneath their feet. Using notes from Captain Frederick Bailey, a British secret agent who'd stumbled across a hidden valley in Tibet in the 1930s while reconnoitering with rebel groups in Asia, Fisher helped locate the fabled Kintup Falls, a thundering cascade that conceals the entrance to the deepest canyon on the planet. From there, Fisher moled his way into lost worlds on five continents, sliding through war zones and murderous militias to pioneer descents in Bosnia, Ethiopia, China, Namibia, Bolivia, and China.

Secret agents, whizzing bullets, prehistoric kingdoms . . . even Ernest Hemingway would have shut up and surrendered the floor if Fisher walked into the bar. But no matter where he roamed, Fisher kept circling back home to his greatest passion: the bewitching girl next door, the Copper Canyons.

During one expedition into the Barrancas, Fisher and his fiancée, Kitty Williams, became friends with Patrocinio López, a young Tarahumara man who'd wandered into the modern world when a new logging road pushed into his homeland. Patrocinio was Holly-

wood handsome and musically gifted on the two-string Tarahumara *chabareke*, and so agreeable to working with the Bearded Devils that the Chihuahua Tourism Department adopted him as the face for the Copper Canyon Express, a luxury vintage train that makes whistle-stops along the rim of the Barrancas and allows tourists in air-conditioned railcars to be served by bow-tied waiters while peering at the savage country below. Patrocinio's job was to pose for posters with a violin he'd carved by hand (a handicraft legacy from the Spanish slave days), as if to suggest that the life of the Tarahumara down yonder was all hunky guys and fiddle music.

Rick and Kitty asked Patrocinio if he could take them to a *rarijipari*, the ancient Tarahumara ball race. *Maybe*, Patrocinio replied, before demonstrating that he'd adopted the modern world as much as it had adopted him: *If you're willing to pay*. He made Rick and Kitty an offer—he'd roust some runners, if they'd pony up food for his entire village.

Deal?

Deal.

Rick and Kitty delivered the chow, and Patrocinio delivered one hell of a race. When Rick and Kitty arrived at the village, they didn't find some rinky-dink fun run awaiting them; instead, thirty-four Tarahumara men were stripping down to breechcloths and sandals, getting prereace rubdowns from medicine men, and slamming back last-minute cups of *iskiate*. At the bark of the village elder, they were off, charging down the dirt trail in a sixty-mile, no mercy, dawn-to-dusk, semi-controlled stampede, flowing past Rick and Kitty with the speed and near-telepathic precision of migrating sparrows.

Yow! Now THAT's running! Kitty, a seasoned ultrarunner herself, was enthralled. She'd grown up watching her father, Ed Williams, turn himself into an unstoppable mountain racer despite living along the lowland banks of the Mississippi. Testament to Ed's toughness was the fact that of all races in the world, his favorite was one of the scariest: the notorious Leadville Trail 100, a hundred-mile ultramarathon held in Colorado, which he'd finished twelve times and was still running *at age seventy*.

A beautiful marriage was forming in Rick's mind: Patrocinio could get him runners, and future dad-in-law Ed could get him

inside juice with a prestigious race. All he had left to do was hit up some charities for corn donations to tempt the Tarahumara, and maybe get a shoe company to put them in something sturdier than those sandals, and . . .

Fisher schemed on, clueless that he was fine-tuning a fiasco.

CHAPTER 9

Make friends with pain, and you will never be alone.

—KEN CHLOUBER,
Colorado miner and creator of the Leadville Trail 100

THE BIG, fat flaw in Rick Fisher's plan was the fact that the Leadville race happens to be held in Leadville.

Hunkered in a valley two miles up in the Colorado Rockies, Leadville is the highest city in North America and, many days, the coldest (the fire company couldn't ring its bell come winter, afraid it would shatter). One look at those peaks had the first settlers shaking in their coonskins. "For there, before their unbelieving eyes, loomed the most powerful and forbidding geological phenomenon they had ever seen," recounts Leadville historian Christian Buys. "They might as well have been on another planet. It was that remote and threatening to all but the most adventuresome."

Of course, things have improved since then: the fire company now uses a horn. Otherwise, well . . . "Leadville is a home for miners, muckers, and mean motherfuckers," says Ken Chlouber, who was an out-of-work, bronco-busting, Harley-riding, hard-rock miner when he created the Leadville Trail 100, in 1982. "Folks who live at ten thousand feet are cut from a different kind of leather."

Dog-toy-tough or not, when Leadville's top physician heard what Ken had in mind, he was outraged. "You *cannot* let people run a hundred miles at this altitude," railed Dr. Robert Woodward. He was so pissed off he had a finger in Ken's face, which didn't bode well for his finger. If you've seen Ken, with those steel-toed boots on his size 13 stompers and that mug as craggy as the rock he blasted for a living,