

# BUFFALO CARP



VOLUME THREE

## A Ride Home

Quinn worked at the gas station until 10 p.m. After dusting behind the register and straightening the candy displays, he played with the dial on the radio until his replacement, Mark, strode in the front entrance.

"Hey, I read about your brother in the paper." Mark clipped his nametag to his shirt. "Top ten percent of his class—that's awesome. It's hard enough just to get into West Point."

"Yeah. He did okay." Quinn fished his car keys out of his back pocket and started for the door.

"When's his graduation? Are you going out there to see it?"

Quinn glanced back. "Late May, I think." He made it sound like there was nothing more to say. "See you."

Mark shrugged and called back, "Yeah, okay; I'll see you," before leaning over to tune the radio.

Out in the night air, Quinn tilted his head back and looked up at the freshly cleared skies. The rain had finally hit earlier that evening and had broken up the muggy daytime air. The stars were as bright as they ever got in the suburbs. The buzz of high fluorescent lights was a soundtrack to his exit. He thought about his brother. If Craig had ever been here, looking at these stars, it would have been just for a moment, filling the gas tank before heading off for someplace more important.

Quinn swung his key ring on one finger as he rounded the car wash. The gas station's lot was separated by a median from the junior college's wide parking lot, where the last of the night classes were getting out. This term Quinn had day classes, so he picked up night shifts at the gas station to pay for books and tuition.



Laughter from the edge of the college lot made him look up. A girl was walking fast, holding a textbook and a clutch purse against her chest in a nervous hug. She was wearing a long dress, and her boots clacked against the blacktop. Two short, skinny guys were behind her, matching her pace within reaching distance. They were muttering at her and laughing. Quinn couldn't make out what they were saying.

She looked up, and her wild, red-rimmed eyes caught his. She held the look.

Quinn's long strides closed the distance between them. He smiled at her like they were friends and said, "Hey, how's it going?"

She looked up at him and made a relieved sound that was half gasp, half sigh.

Quinn glanced at the girl's two pursuers. They exchanged looks, and then one of them gave him a surly grin and sauntered away. The other, in a fraying black T-shirt turned inside out, bumped his shoulder hard against Quinn as he walked past.

Without thought, Quinn shoved him, and the guy stumbled.

For a moment, no one moved or said anything. Quinn wondered if they could hear him breathing. The world was blinking white with each throb of his heart. In the frozen moment, his opponents looked massive.

Then the guy's lips peeled back into a leer at the girl. His friend slunk up beside him and mumbled into his ear, his stare stroking the girl's body. They both snickered and walked away, throwing obscene glances over their shoulders at her.

Quinn stood watching until they were gone, his breath tumbling back toward normal. Something inside him felt fierce and alive. He had won.

Remembering, he turned to the girl. "Are you okay?" She was trembling, staring in the direction they had disappeared. She was familiar. She had been in a class with him at some point—an English class. Slowly she met Quinn's

look, and tears slipped down her already wet cheeks. She pressed her hand against her mouth.

Quinn put his hands in his pockets and scuffed at a dried gum circle on the blacktop. He remembered her a little from class, how she had sat alone, not speaking to anyone, her attention always tucked into the heavy textbook. He wished he could remember her name. "They won't come back, you know. You don't have to worry about them." He paused. "They didn't hurt you, or anything, did they?"

She shook her head, still crying. Quinn didn't know where to look. He wanted to get in his car and drive home, but he couldn't walk away. She looked as lost as anyone could be.

"Do you need me to walk you to your car?" he asked.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I was trying to catch the last bus. . . . They were standing there by the doors waiting for me, so I doubled back and came out the other exit, but they followed me." She glanced at her watch. "It's gone now—the bus, I mean. It always leaves right at 9:55."

"There's a phone at the gas station. You could call someone to pick you up." Quinn wanted to look at his watch, but she was staring at him with those watery eyes.

"There's no one home. My mom works late. She won't be home until midnight."

Quinn nodded. "Um, how about a cab? Do you live far from here?"

"About half an hour. . . ." She opened her purse and peeked inside. Quinn got the feeling, from her look, that her wallet was about as empty as his.

"Look, I could drive you home, if you want."

She looked up at him, doubt pinching her eyes. "Maybe I should just. . . ." She trailed off and scrubbed at her eyes again. She glanced around the empty lot as if hoping to see a bus she hadn't noticed before.

"The gas station stays open all night. You could stay there and call your mom later." He didn't mind driving her



home, but he could see she didn't like the idea.

But his last suggestion seemed to seal her decision. "I can't stay out here all night," she said, looking up and scooping her hair back from her face. "If you don't mind, maybe I will go with you." She stopped and added, as if to rationalize, "You were in my English class last term."

"Yeah." He turned to lead her back to the car and then added, "My name's Quinn."

"I remember," she said. She paused, and when he didn't say anything, she added, "I'm Audrey." He just nodded and walked back to the car.

Quinn started the engine and turned down the blast of the radio. "Sorry," he mumbled, backing the car out of the parking space. "Where do you live?"

The lights from the street rolled over the windshield and their faces. Quinn held the wheel with both hands and cast little glances at Audrey. She was staring out the window, pushing her fingertips across her cheeks every few moments and sniffing. He didn't understand why she was still so upset; after all, she was safe now. Then again, this seemed to fit with what he knew of her. After a class discussion on love and family one day, he had seen her trying to conceal tears on her way out of class. Maybe she was just oversensitive.

The night sky lay open before them, hemmed at the bottom by grass and street. The stars were distracting in the post-rain sky. Quinn suddenly imagined his brother in this situation. With that low-humming voice of his, Craig would have had this girl smiling before they had gotten into the car. He would have had her talking about herself and her family, at ease, her fear forgotten. That had been Craig's talent from the time they were young. He had been enchanting everyone he met with stories and animated conversation ever since Quinn could remember. Quinn could never identify how Craig captured a stranger's trust. He had never been able to pin down what it was in Craig's words that made people want to sit closer to him and listen to everything he said. Quinn could only watch and wonder

what it was like to be the person no one ever forgot.

Something inside of him stirred. He wanted that feeling back, the feeling he'd had in the parking lot, like he had done something important. Craig could make people smile, but so could Quinn. He smiled a little and turned the car in at a fast food restaurant, past a sign that glowed out a message about double cheeseburgers and new late hours.

"Why are we stopping?" Audrey demanded.

"I . . . thought you might be hungry," he said, realizing how stupid the words sounded even as he was saying them. Craig probably could have made her suggest this herself and think it was her idea. "Do you want to get something to eat really quick?"

She glanced at him and then at the purse in her lap.

"I can cover it," Quinn added.

Audrey looked up at the restaurant. "I guess," she said.

She hadn't smiled, but she had said yes; that was something. Quinn turned off the engine and pocketed his keys. Audrey followed him up to the restaurant, and he held the door for her. Inside, the floor was scuffed but swept. The booths and tables were empty except for a teenage couple sitting near the window, murmuring together. Two workers were slouched up against the counter, talking. They wore matching purple T-shirts with the restaurant logo stitched over the pocket.

One of them straightened when they approached and asked without enthusiasm, "Can I help you?"

Audrey squinted up at the fluorescent menu, so Quinn ordered a chicken sandwich and large pop and then fingered through his wallet while she ordered. While the workers pulled the pre-cooked food off of metal racks, Quinn observed Audrey. He hadn't really had a chance to look at her before, in the half illumination of the parking lot. She was almost as tall as he was, in a long tan-colored dress with a thin gray cardigan. She had highlighted her long brown hair; it looked like chocolate and caramel melted



together and poured. She might have been prettier if she smiled.

"So. . ." Quinn stopped when she looked up. He cleared his throat and tapped his fingers against the smooth metal counter. She looked away.

They brought the paper-wrapped sandwiches back to a booth after adding a pile of napkins to the tray. Quinn settled on an uncomfortable plastic swivel chair across from her and opened his sandwich. He picked off the lettuce, starting to wish that Craig were here. He felt like he had forgotten how to speak English. "What kind of classes are you taking?" he finally asked, without looking up from the lettuce.

"Mostly just the basics. It's my first year." Audrey nibbled at the edge of her hamburger.

Quinn nodded. "I take classes in the daytime. . . history and science, right now."

The speaker system drooled a '60s song about beaches and blondes. Quinn got up for salt packets and more napkins. When he came back, Audrey was chewing off the tip of a french fry and staring at the grease-spotted advertisement sheet from the food tray. He didn't think she was reading it.

"Do you work, too, or just go to school?" he asked.

"I work at the mall."

He nodded and sipped his cola. "I work at the gas station. The one over by where we, uh, met." She was silent, so he continued. "So . . . did you know those guys?"

She looked at him sharply.

"From the parking lot, I mean." Quinn wished he had said something else.

"I know which guys you meant." She stabbed the ketchup with a fry. "No, I never saw them before."

Quinn nodded. "Maybe you should buy some mace, or something." When she didn't respond, he looked up again. She was dabbing at her eyes, her jaw clenched. He hesitated and chewed a mouthful of chicken. "They were just messing with you. They weren't going to do anything."

"You didn't hear what they said."

"Well . . . you really shouldn't let them get to you. That's what they want."

Audrey put her face in her hands. Quinn wished he were anywhere else—preferably on another planet—anywhere but sitting here with her. He could imagine Craig making everything better with just a word. "Hey, look, I didn't mean to . . ." Quinn stopped and sighed.

"Can you just take me home?" Audrey looked up at him over the half-eaten meal. She pursed her lips and gave a little shake of her head. "Tonight was just . . . the last straw . . ." She shook her head again. "I don't want to talk about it. I just want to go home."

"Yeah . . . sure." Quinn stacked the rest of the food onto the tray and pushed it all into the swinging Thank You sign on the garbage can. He followed Audrey back out to the car.

The roads were empty and the ride quiet. Audrey leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. Quinn turned on the stereo and let a mindless pop song fill up the interior of the car. He was running through lines in his mind, trying to hear them in Craig's voice. There had to be something to say, something to make her smile. But maybe there wasn't. Maybe it wasn't about words. Maybe it was about who said them.

He turned onto her street. The bland beige apartment buildings stretched in military rows on either side. It wasn't a bad place to live, probably, but it wasn't nice.

"Follow the curve in the road. It's on the left." Audrey gathered up her book and purse in one arm and put her other hand on the seat belt release.

Quinn slowed on the curve. "I'm sorry if I made things worse," he said, not looking at her. "I hope you're okay."

It sounded about as awkward as he felt, but at least he had said it. Pleased with himself, he darted a look at her. She was staring out the windshield, her face unchanged.

Quinn squeezed the steering wheel and didn't look at her again.



He eased the car into the driveway. "Well . . ."

Audrey unbuckled her seatbelt and tilted her head without quite looking at him. "Thanks," she said.

The car door opened and shut, and he was alone. He watched her rush up the concrete path and pause to fumble with her keys.

He sat for an instant, stunned, but aware that he shouldn't be. What had he expected, for her to fall into his arms and proclaim eternal gratitude, or maybe ask him to wait right here so that her friends and family could come thank him? He yanked the volume knob on the stereo to the right and threw the car into reverse, backing out past the squat evergreen shrubs. Without intending to, he glanced up at the apartment building one more time.

Audrey was standing in the open doorway, watching him. She caught his gaze and smiled distinctly. The front lamp light made her face glow a sort of golden yellow. Then she disappeared behind the door.

Quinn drove down the street. The stars hung like medals on the dark uniform of sky.