

# SUNDERWORLD V-01

- MONO
- STEREO
- NR

## THE EXTRAORDINARY DISAPPOINTMENTS OF

- SP
- LP
- EP

LEOPOLD  
BERRY



From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*

# RANSOM RIGGS



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DUTTON BOOKS

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*For Tahereh*

**Leopold Berry had been trying to ignore the raccoon in the tree out the window,** but like so many things in his life, it seemed impossible. The raccoon was perched on a branch that aligned perfectly with the head of the man Leopold was supposed to be listening to—a man who'd just asked Leopold a question he hadn't really heard. It almost seemed like the raccoon was trying to distract him on purpose. Twice the creature had nearly fallen out of the tree, only to drag itself back onto the branch after a lot of clawing and flailing. Just now, its tail had burst into flames.

The natural thing to do, Leopold realized, would've been to direct the attention of his father and the interviewer to the animal-on-fire as explanation for why he'd been so distracted these past minutes. He couldn't, of course, because the raccoon's tail was not really on fire. The raccoon was not really there at all.

These things happened to Leopold sometimes.

When he was twelve, a therapist told him he had a hyperactive imagination—that he saw strange and impossible things at the moments he most wanted to escape from his life. He'd once been plagued by these dissociative episodes, but it had been years since the last one. Then, a week ago, Leopold had seen a single, small rain cloud trail a harried fruit vendor down a sidewalk in Hollywood. The week before that, through the windshield of his traffic-stalled car, he'd watched a man pry a tooth from his mouth and insert it into a parking meter, prompting a fissure to open in the pavement. With a furtive glance behind him, the man had climbed into the cavity, disappearing just before it closed over his head. But these episodes had been brief, and each time Leopold had assured himself it was nothing to worry about. Who didn't occasionally fantasize while stuck in traffic?

But now the raccoon.

This episode had lasted longer than either the tooth man or the fruit vendor, which was disconcerting and, at the moment, extraordinarily inconvenient. He desperately wished the raccoon that was not really there anyway would just disappear.

Then, with a peevish flick of its flaming tail, it did.

The meeting had not been going well even prior to the raccoon. Leopold wasn't purposely trying to frustrate his interviewer, an avuncular older man in golf clothes who had started off smiling but now looked like he, too, wished he were somewhere else. Nor was he hoping to piss

off Richter, his tall, barrel-chested father, who was growing quietly apoplectic in the chair beside Leopold. He really was doing his best, if only to appease Richter, but he couldn't focus. The gray suit Leopold had been forced to wear was loose in some places and tight in others. He was certain his pale skin had flushed bright red. He'd forgotten most of the canned responses his father had encouraged him to memorize, and the ones he did remember came out sounding forced. And now he'd allowed six seconds of excruciating silence to elapse as he stared out the window at a nonexistent raccoon.

Leopold directed his eyes back to the man behind the desk.

"Sorry, what was the question again?"

There was a creak of stiff leather as Leopold's father dug his fingers into the arms of his chair. "Larry's just tired," he said through peroxide-white teeth. "Poor kid was so excited about this meeting, he hardly slept last night."

Larry was a nickname Leopold had acquired in childhood and had never been able to shake. *Larry Berry*: It sounded like a punchline. The only person ever to call him by his given name, Leopold, had been his mother, and because it rang foreign on anyone else's tongue, he'd long ago resigned himself to Larry, a name that made him cringe whenever it was spoken aloud.

The man glanced at his watch. An electric guitar, signed by the members of some famous band, was displayed proudly on the wall. "No need to be nervous, Larry. We're just having a friendly conversation." He grinned in a way that was designed to put Leopold at ease. "I asked, what's your greatest strength? What do you feel you're best at?"

Leopold cleared his throat. He could feel his father's eyes drilling into him.

"Well, um, I guess..."

He tried to conjure one of the answers he'd rehearsed, something about leadership and problem-solving.

"...I don't really know?"

"If you ask me, Mick," his father cut in, "Larry's problem is he has too many strengths. Makes it tough to decide where to focus his energy. Berry family curse!" He laughed like a sputtering engine.

The man chuckled politely. "Then I'll make this easier. How about you give me your top three."

Leopold's mind went blank. He saw something flick among the branches of the tree out the window but forced himself to ignore it. His palms began to itch.

"*Larry*," his father hissed. "No need to be modest."

"I'm not." Leopold shifted in his seat. "I'm just...not the best at anything."

His father made a strangled noise.

"Now, I'm sure that's not true," said the interviewer.

But it felt true. It was the truest-feeling thing Leopold had said aloud in a long time. What he excelled at were minor things his father thought categorically worthless: working on his old car, tinkering with small electrical objects, and making homemade movies set in the world of a certain fantasy TV show that had gone off the air before he was born. He was ashamed of these forgettable skills, so he never mentioned them.



The man winked. “Don’t worry. I’m good at finding hidden talents.”

“I certainly hope so,” Larry’s father muttered.

In Richter Berry’s opinion, there were two types of people in the world: winners and losers. He’d argued as much in his first book, *Think Like a Winner*, the publication of which he’d parlayed into a career as a success coach, a profession that suited him perfectly because it involved, mainly, yelling at people. So long as he did it with a smile, a shocking number of seemingly well-adjusted people would submit to being berated, harangued, and belittled by Richter Berry in the name of self-improvement. Whole auditoriums of them, all paying for the privilege.

Richter was very proud of himself, and of his two stepsons, Hal and Drake. Hal, captain of his high school wrestling team, and Drake, going into his second year at USC’s business school, were turning out to be killers in the barrel-chested mold of their stepfather. But Richter was worried—had been worried for years—that his biological son, a lean, dreamy, distractible boy with no discernible talent for, or interest in, anything practical at all, was growing up to become...*not* a winner.

But Richter was no quitter.

He couldn’t abide a failure in the family; it simply didn’t fit the brand. He’d given his son several perfectly good options for a future career: Larry could go to law school and become a lawyer (preferably corporate); go to business school and get on the executive track (Fortune 500, or what was the point); do a finance program that would lead to private equity or investment banking (Goldman, ideally, though the boy was hopeless with numbers, so that seemed the least likely of the three). All Larry had to do was choose one, and like magic he’d have the inestimable blessing of his father’s support. Richter, self-made son of a pig farmer from a hardscrabble town in the Midwest, would’ve killed for such an opportunity at seventeen. But the boy was like a cat: strange, lazy, and nearly impossible to train. His mother had been far too easy on him, so now, to compensate, Richter had to be hard; Larry had made it abundantly clear that he would never be hard on himself, that if given half the chance he’d spend the rest of his life with his head in the clouds and accomplish absolutely nothing. So when, after innumerable lectures and tirades, Larry had still not chosen one path over another, Richter had engaged the (very expensive) services of the best private college admissions counselor in Los Angeles, a man who had miracled C students with no legacy credentials into Harvard, and felonious delinquents from nothing families into Stanford. It was amazing he’d even found the time to slot them in for a meeting. And now, probably just to spite him, his son was flushing a golden opportunity down the toilet.

“What about the aptitude test?” Richter asked.

The interviewer’s bulletproof smile faltered. “Wasn’t too helpful, I’m afraid.”

The raccoon was back on its branch, one leg extended skyward, earnestly licking its privates.

“Larry’s results were a bit...inconclusive. His grades don’t reveal any special aptitude for one path over another, though that’s not especially uncommon. As for the test, Larry scored the perfect average on every metric.” He almost looked impressed. “Never seen that before.”

“You mean to say,” Leopold’s father huffed, “he’s perfectly average.”

The counselor hesitated. “I think results like this reveal the limitations of testing, not of your son. Which is exactly why we bring potential clients in for these little heart-to-hearts.” The word *potential* seemed to hang in the air. “I can help you, Larry. But first you have to be honest with me.”

*Stop calling me Larry*, Leopold thought.

The counselor steepled his fingers beneath his chin. “Let’s forget colleges and careers altogether for a minute. Here’s the most important question: What do you love? What’s your passion?”

Leopold’s instinct was to give a canned answer, but there was an attentiveness in the man’s eyes that caught him off guard. He actually seemed to be listening. Leopold couldn’t remember the last time an adult had done that. And so he was compelled to do something he almost never did in front of his father: tell something like the truth.

“Well, I think I might be good at editing movies,” Leopold ventured. He hadn’t quite found the courage to say *directing* movies, and editing sounded like a more achievable but still respectable career prospect.

The man leaned forward, head bobbing.

“I was wondering, maybe, about...film school.”

His father wafted a hand through the air. “Four year jerk-off.”

“Actually, this could be perfect,” said the counselor. “This, I can work with.”

Leopold felt a small hope spark in his chest. Like maybe his whole life was about to change, and a door was opening he’d never known was there. And then the man said, “You should consider entertainment law. Some of the best-paid lawyers I know work for movie studios,” and as he began to describe the impressive house in Malibu owned by one such lawyer, a ringing filled Leopold’s head, and he saw something out the window he could no longer ignore: The raccoon, now fully engulfed in flames and leaping from branch to branch, had caught the tree on fire. As the blaze spread quickly through the canopy, a flock of small birds, also on fire, shuddered out of the leaves and scattered into the air.

Leopold went rigid, suppressing a sudden urge to panic. Not because the tree was on fire—he knew it wasn’t—but because there was no denying it now.

*It’s happening again*, he thought.

He was Seeing into Sunder.

**“Drugs. He actually asked me if you were on drugs.”**

That was all Richter Berry said to his son during the long march back to the parking structure, after which he fell into a boiling silence broken only by the sound of his angry breathing, a labored whistle that issued from his nose as he stared vacantly ahead, trying to calm down enough to start yelling.

Richter was silent during the interminable elevator ride down into the parking structure’s muggy bowels. Silent during the whole drunken elephant ballet that was getting out of the congested garage—a procedure made more difficult by the awkward length of Leopold’s ancient Volvo station wagon and its lack of parking sensors, backup cameras, or any other modern conveniences. Silent as Leopold struggled to click his frayed seat belt into place. That Richter hadn’t even made a comment about the Volvo, a family embarrassment which he consented to ride in only when his Porsche was in the shop—as it was today—meant he was well and truly about to explode.

They reached the pay booth without incident, only to discover that three seventy-five was owed even though Leopold had gotten their parking stub validated, that the garage only accepted cash, and that aside from an old movie ticket stub and his driver’s license, Leopold’s wallet was empty. He knew better than to ask his father for the money, or he’d get the You’re Never Prepared lecture on top of whatever tirade was already in store for him. In a panic, he ran his hands through the cup holder, the side-door pocket, and the never-used ashtray, which netted him a grand total of three fifty, still a quarter short. As a car honked somewhere in the line forming behind them, Leopold apologized to the old lady attending the booth, unbuckled his safety belt, and jammed his arm down into the crack of the cloth seat. That earned him a cut on his finger, a smear of belt actuator lubricant on his wrist, and two sticky dimes. He gathered the coins and wadded bills and held them out in cupped hands.

Accepting them with a lugubrious sigh, the attendant began to tally the change. She was of young grandma age, just elderly enough that Leopold wondered what had gone wrong in her life that she had to work a job like this, forced to make change all day in the lightless belly of a Beverly Hills office building. She wore a rumpled green vest with the words *Underground Parking Corp* stitched above a name badge that read *Rochelle*.

Another horn bellowed in the rumbling gloom. Sweat trickled down Leopold's collar. Rochelle finished her leisurely count and looked up at him, expressionless. "You owe me a nickel."

"I know. I'm really sorry. That's all I have." Leopold prayed she would just shrug and wave him through, but she only stared.

Leopold tried again. "Could I come back with it later?"

Richter sighed, leaned roughly across Leopold, and thrust a hundred-dollar bill at the woman. This meant the You're Never Prepared lecture was now unavoidable. The attendant pursed her lips and pointed to a sign that read NO BILLS OVER \$20. Richter Berry retracted his hand with imperial slowness before folding the money carefully into his crocodile-leather wallet. He preferred cash and never carried anything smaller than a hundred, on principle. A principle covered in chapter four of *Think Like a Winner*.

"You have five days to pay via mail," the attendant monotoned, "or your debt will be turned over to a collections agency. I'll give you the address."

Even in the dark, Leopold could sense his father turning purple.

The attendant swiveled on her stool to grab a slip of paper, and that was when it came to Leopold's attention that she had a pair of wings sprouting through the back of her vest. They were dull gray, about the size of a backpack, and lay folded against her shoulder blades, the feathers a bit rumpled from long hours of sitting.

Leopold sat blinking, his face going tingly.

He seemed to lose a bit of time: One moment he was staring at the wings and wondering how she'd gotten her clothes on over them, and the next he was jolted by another car horn, the attendant having swiveled back to face him. She gave him a strange look while waving the slip of paper in his direction.

He reached out to take it, his eyes fixed on her vest. He was sure the words stitched above her name badge had changed. With the addition of a single letter, they now read SUNDERGROUND PARKING CORP.

He whispered the word aloud, his lips forming it involuntarily.

*Sunder.*

The woman snatched his outstretched wrist. Her hand was icy, and the strength in her arthritic fingers was unbelievable, like talons digging into his skin. She leaned toward him and whispered in a voice that was low and raspy and slightly threatening:

*"It ain't polite to stare."*

The ghost of a smile touched her lips, then vanished just as quickly.

She let him go. He reeled back into his seat. The barrier arm swung upward as another car blasted its horn.

"Drive!" Richter snapped, looking up from something he'd been typing on his phone. "What's wrong with you?"

Leopold eased the car forward, watching the woman's reflection shrink in his mirror until sunlight blasted the windshield, erasing her. As Richter wondered aloud whether his son might

really be on drugs, Leopold waited for a break in traffic, gripping the wheel tightly so his father wouldn't see his hands shaking.

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## THREE

**Mercifully, Richter hadn't seemed to notice Leopold's bizarre interaction with the parking garage attendant, nor had he seen the wings—because, of course, they hadn't been there.**

Leopold knew from experience that his episodes tended to cluster in threes. The raccoon had been the first; what happened in the garage, the second. Given what usually triggered them—and how badly he wanted to be anywhere other than trapped in the car with his father in steadily thickening traffic—it seemed reasonable to expect that a third would be along anytime now.

He couldn't let it happen.

Not while he was behind the wheel of a moving car, especially with Richter riding shotgun. Telling his dad what was happening to him was not an option, so Leopold focused on the road ahead and pretended Richter wasn't there, nodding occasionally to simulate listening. Maybe this way he would make it home without seeing any more flame-engulfed fauna or parking-garage angels. Maybe this way he wouldn't blank out for thirty seconds and crash the car.

“Damn it, Larry, I said take Fountain!”

Richter's sudden bellow pulled Leopold from his reverie and back into La Cienega Boulevard's rightmost lane, where he'd just missed a crucial turn. This sparked the Always Take Fountain speech, which he endured with little nods and apologies.

He'd learned early in life that there was no arguing with his dad. That would only prolong the lecture and raise its emotional temperature a few notches on the Richter Scale. You just had to endure, and eventually he'd wear himself out. The lectures could be cool-tempered speeches or angry tirades, but they always fell into one of a few categories, so predictable Leopold had given them names. After they'd left the garage and become enmeshed in traffic, Richter had launched into an impassioned delivery of *I've Never Been So Embarrassed in My Life*, an old favorite. He then veered into *You've Got No Ambition*, downshifted into *Aren't You Ashamed of Yourself*, and pirouetted with virtuosic flair into a weirdly self-pitying version of *It's My Fault for Spoiling You*—all interspersed with highlights from Larry's *a Shitty Driver*, a classic Leopold could've recited from memory.

At a red light he felt the Volvo stutter and threaten to stall. He shifted into neutral and feathered the gas so it wouldn't die in the middle of the road, which would almost certainly trigger a high-volume rendition of *I Should Sell This Shitheap for Scrap*—which, of all his father's lectures, was the one Leopold hated most.

The Volvo—Bessie—was Leopold’s dearest possession. She was egg-yolk yellow and speckled with rust and had belonged to his mother. Richter regularly threatened to get rid of it because it was unreliable and ugly and didn’t fit the Berry brand. That he never followed through on his threats seemed a rare proof of kindness in his father, as well as a quiet admission that he, too, missed Leopold’s mom, though they never spoke about it. It was also, Leopold assumed, the only reason Richter allowed the Volvo to remain in their driveway.

Leopold glanced at the trip odometer.

7,261 miles.

It hadn’t been zeroed since she died. Leopold couldn’t bring himself to hit the button, because he marked her death with miles rather than years. Five and a half years ago sounded infinite, an unbridgeable vastness. Somehow, 7,261 miles ago felt closer. That was just a long plane trip.

Sometimes Leopold rode his bike or took the bus because he couldn’t bear to watch the number creep any higher. Sometimes, when he could no longer stand being in his father’s house but had nowhere else to go, he’d slip out and sit in the car for hours, just reading or listening to music. When things got really unbearable, he’d sneak out at night and sleep in the back seat.

Green light.

He shifted into first and the Volvo jerked into motion. At some point the lecture had morphed into a recounting of Leopold’s recent failures, Richter totting them up on his fingers. *Cut from the baseball team. Rejected from that internship. Only summer job you could find was in some lousy coffee shop. And now this—*

The steady drumbeat of *loser, loser, loser* threatened to suffocate him.

He willed himself to think of nothing. Instead, watching the odometer tick over another mile, Leopold thought of his mother—and then of Sunder.

One often begat the other.

**Shortly after his twelfth birthday, in the unseasonable heat of a Los Angeles** December, Leopold's mother had died. It was cancer, rare and aggressive and swift. Before it took her, Monica Berry had insisted on celebrating her son's birthday despite the circumstances, and in the grim period following her death, he was haunted by the image of a forgotten balloon slowly deflating in the corner of her hospital room.

That summer, in the gloom of a sunless June, the episodes had begun.

He came to think of them as Seeing into Sunder.

Sunder was a fictional realm from a 1990s fantasy TV series called *Max's Adventures in Sunderworld*, which had aired, and gone off the air, over a decade before Leopold was born. It was in the blurry weeks after his mother's burial, amidst the hectic move from their bungalow in Venice to Richter's house in Brentwood, that he'd found the seven VHS tapes of its one and only season in a cardboard box bound for the trash. He'd never seen the tapes before and had never heard of the show; he assumed it was one of the many projects his mother had worked on during a youthful stint as a film and TV assistant.

He rescued the tapes and a battered old VCR. It was a few weeks before he bothered figuring out how to hook the VCR up to a TV, and another few before, late at night in his cold new room in Richter's house, he got around to popping in the first tape.

He engaged with only mild interest at first, because *Sunderworld* was kind of campy and cheap-looking: wooden acting, flimsy sets, cinematography that sometimes wasn't even in focus. It followed the adventures of a seemingly unremarkable boy named Max who meets a talking, half-mechanical coyote in the desiccated field behind his apartment complex. The coyote, harried and short on details, gives Max an ornate key before vanishing in a puff of flame. Max locates the corresponding door beneath a freeway overpass, discovers a pleasantly cliché-ridden magical society hidden in the nooks and crannies of Los Angeles, then further discovers he's not only a spark—as the magically inclined citizens of Sunder are known—but a once-in-a-generation channeler, gifted with great power and tasked with protecting Sunder against Noxum, monstrous invaders from the Ninth Realm. Max learns to wield an Aether focuser and spends the rest of the season kicking Noxum ass up and down the streets of Sunder in ways that were highly creative—and surprisingly gory—for what was ostensibly a kids' show.



Leopold was aware of *Sunderworld*'s surface-level crappiness even at age twelve, and yet there was something about the show and its weird LA fantasy world that captured his heart.

It wasn't long before he was properly obsessed.

He watched *Sunderworld* so many times his ancient VCR started eating the tapes, unwinding them into tangled black nests that could be extracted from the machine only with chopsticks and surgical precision. Having committed every episode to memory and hungry for more of what was clearly an unfinished story, Leopold set out to make new episodes himself. He wrote scripts longhand on legal pads, assembled costumes and props from thrift store junk, and recruited neighborhood kids as actors. He cast his best friend, Emmet Worthington, as Max, and in rec rooms and backyards across LA they spun out the continuing adventures of Max and his magical companions. They spent weekends shooting and long nights creating mangle-faced monsters that spouted fountains of corn syrup blood. They never finished a single episode, but it didn't matter. Through the bleakest time he had ever known, Leopold was happy only when immersed in *Sunder*.

"Forget Fountain," his father said with a rough sigh. "Take Sunset instead. I need to check on the new billboard."

Leopold, who'd been trying to circle back to Fountain via a series of painful left-hand turns, felt a loosening in his chest as he signaled and made a comparatively easy right. The emotional temperature in the car began to drop. His father's publisher had taken out an actual, physical, in-person ad to promote his latest book, *Only Losers Don't Win*, and the prospect of seeing his own face, fifty feet wide and glowering across Sunset Boulevard, seemed to improve Richter's mood almost instantly.

Leopold merged carefully into the six-lane circus that was Sunset at rush hour. Now all he had to do was pilot them home without Seeing into *Sunder* again.

The first time it happened, over that long-ago summer following his mother's death, Leopold had been scouting locations for a shoot near the Tar Pits. It was down an alley between Gardner and Detroit, ringed by overflowing dumpsters, that he'd seen a pair of rust fiends feasting on a pile of old computers. They'd looked up, keyboards impaled on their blunt tusks, and spat a volley of steaming green bile in Leopold's direction.

Terrified, he'd fled straight home.

Leopold assumed it had been some kind of waking dream. Then, a week later, it happened again. He'd been in Hollywood with Emmet and a couple of other friends, waiting on the sidewalk for Emmet's mom to pick them up after a matinee at the El Capitan. The paladin woman was unmistakable in her long leather coat and boots, a heavy glass Aether focuser dangling from a holster on her belt. She could've been another Hollywood impersonator trolling for tips, except that *Sunderworld* was completely unknown outside his small circle of friends—and because her head had been engulfed by a bright blue glow.

No one else had even noticed her.

By the time Leopold had collected his wits and followed her into the laundromat next door, she was gone. But this time he wasn't terrified.

Leopold was elated.

In the show, Max had also seen things that didn't seem to align with reality. They were pre-coyote peeks into Sunder—before he got his key—designed to prepare Max's mind for what would otherwise be an unalloyed trauma. Naturally, Leopold came to believe his episodes were preparing him for his own adventures, and that soon he'd be meeting a half-mechanical harbinger of his own, getting his own key, finding his own door. He'd felt more certain of this than about anything since his mother died.

Still, Leopold told no one, not even Emmet.

He marked the date on his calendar: Keys were usually granted at the summer solstice. But when the solstice of his twelfth year came and went without a visit from a key-bearing coyote, Leopold was crestfallen. With the rug pulled, the enormity of his mother's death threatened to crush him. His father, rather than help Leopold mourn the woman from whom he'd been acrimoniously divorced, shuffled Leopold off to a series of grief counselors. The boy sank into a dark place and drifted away from most of his friends.

When another year came and went without a key, Leopold began to wonder if it was because he'd moved away from the house where he'd lived for so long with his mom, and some Sunderian functionary had simply failed to inform the coyote of Leopold's forwarding address. So he spent the solstice day of his fourteenth year camped out on the sidewalk in front of their old house in Venice, where strangers now lived.

No key was delivered.

He'd gotten badly sunburned from sitting outside for hours, but no coyote had come.

And so at fourteen he'd finally stopped hoping, stopped believing, stopped seeing sparks and magical creatures. With the help of a therapist, Leopold realized he'd been seeing those things only because he'd needed the fantasy to move through the darkest depths of his grief.

In that way, Sunder had saved him, even though it was just a crappy old TV show. He was grateful for that, at least.

He'd thrown away his props and buried the tapes in a closet. These days, Sunder rarely crossed his mind. Unloved and obscure, *Sunderworld* had never been released on DVD or Blu-ray; no one had even bothered uploading it to YouTube. It had been three years since he'd seen so much as a snippet of it. Three years since he'd Seen into Sunder, too, though he didn't think of his episodes that way anymore.

Now there'd been two in a day.

And then Richter exploded, and there was another.

**It was the billboard that set him off. Perched on the hill above Carney's—on the north side of the street across from the Sunset Tower hotel—it loomed into view and sent Richter into an instant rage.**

The printers had misspelled the name of his website.

Leopold's adrenaline spiked as his father ranted about suing the printer, demanding that his son look, *look* at the incompetence he was forced to deal with—

Leopold glanced at the billboard for only a moment, then returned his eyes to the road to discover a red blur filling the better part of the windshield. Some kind of streetcar was crossing in front of them, careening through the intersection—and they were about to slam straight into it.

Leopold shouted and hit the brakes.

Their seat belts locked as a tide of trash from the back seat broke over them, the Volvo fishtailing while cars swerved and honked. The unhinged screaming began even before they'd come to a full stop.

"Are you trying to kill us?! What the hell is wrong with you?"

"We were going to hit that—that red trolley thing—"

"What trolley? What are you talking about? Are you out of your goddamn mind?"

Leopold looked again.

There was no streetcar climbing the hill to their left. No trolley tracks in the pavement.

"I should take away your license!" Richer plucked a crumpled hamburger wrapper from his lap and flung it at his son. "This shitheap is getting scrapped first thing tomorrow. And this time I mean it."

His father got out, slammed the door, and flipped off his own giant face. Then he started speed-walking down Sunset, leaving Leopold to sort out the mess on his own.

Leopold's hands were shaking and itching. He tried to start the Volvo. It had stalled, of course, and now it refused to start again.

He screamed in pure blind rage, then slammed his hands against the wheel as hard as he could—and a Roman candle's worth of bright red sparks came flaring out of them, blinding him briefly while filling the car with amber-hued smoke. It was several seconds before it dissipated, leaving ghostly whorls of whitish vapor curling in the air.

Leopold sat there, stunned, as the last traces evaporated. He couldn't hear the horns anymore, or Sunset Boulevard at all—only the blood pounding in his ears.

He turned his hands over and stared at them. They throbbed a little, but aside from the old, faintly ridged line of moon-shaped calluses that cut across the center of both palms, his hands looked normal.

Only they didn't itch anymore.