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Opening extract from  
**Pick Your Poison**

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**The queen looked out from her window and down upon Snow White.**

**Gazing at the girl's raven-black hair and flawless skin made the queen sad.**

**“How good she is, how well loved,” she hissed, plucking up a rosy red apple. Turning it in her hand, the queen caught sight of her image in its perfect polished skin. “Is there a person who loathes her other than I?” Letting out a cry of rage she brought the apple to her lips, opened her mouth and sank her teeth into its white flesh.**

## **A perfect storm**

WAY OUT TO THE NORTHEAST OF THE CITY WERE THE FLATLANDS, acre upon acre of prairie grass that waved in the warm winds blowing in from the ocean.

The girl was taking the long road to her grandmother's ranch house. She imagined it would take her no more than an hour, so she would still be in good time; she had promised to be there by noon. The weather station had warned of an electrical storm and dark clouds were already forming in the great skies above her.

The girl had tried to coax her dog, a young husky pup, to travel with her in her bicycle basket, but the dog had looked up at the sky and howled when she tried to carry him from the house, his fur standing right on end.

It was as if he knew what was coming. There had been talk of a tornado looking to bear down and she had a mind to see it begin to pick up before it whirled in. Timing, she knew, was everything when it came to tornadoes. They could whip up quick and vanish in minutes, the average for these parts being around twenty. You had to be careful - you mistime it and you

might be snatched up inside that wind funnel, for you could not outrun a tornado, only sidestep it; this her nine-year-old self knew for a certainty.

She hadn't travelled more than halfway there when she realised she had left it too late. Turn back, keep going, it didn't matter – she was never going to make it to the ranch before the storm struck. A lone tree grew out from the only raised piece of land in more than a hundred miles, a tree bent sideways by the relentless west wind and the only landmark on the whole horizon other than the marching telegraph poles.

But it was a good landmark. She remembered how the tree grew out of rock, not a cave exactly but a pile of stones so heavy that they looked like they hadn't moved in more than ten thousand years. The girl saw at once that if she could make it to those rocks and climb between them then she would escape the tornado's hold.

She let go of her bike and abandoned it right there, where it fell, on the tarmac road. She began to run across the open grassland, feeling the whipping wind as she fled. She ran, ran like the devil himself were chasing her, ran like all hell was biting at her ankles. The coarse grass was slurring her movement, wrapping about her legs, but she wouldn't let it pull her down. There were the rocks and the half cave. She threw herself in just as the whirling funnel picked up over her head, and through the crack in the stone she saw her little green bicycle hooked up by the finger of wind and pulled high into its centre.

She didn't notice the hissing thing: the wind drowned out its sound. Nor did she notice it raise its head and open its jaws wide, exposing those perfectly sharp prongs of teeth. She felt it though: a sharp pain followed by a sickening ache. A strange sensation.

She turned to look it in the eyes. Black eyes set in an arrow-shaped head, dark diamonds running down its brown back. She looked at it, unblinking, as it slowly wound itself back into the shadows.

Suddenly everything became hyper real, the strange crag of the rocks, one jutting stone looking almost like a dog's head – she thought of her husky and wished he was at her side. She tried to steady her breathing and reached for the notebook and pencil she had tucked inside her pocket. She drew the head shape and the markings, making a note of the colours, and once she was sure she had all the information, she removed the sneaker from her left foot followed by her striped sock, cutting away the toe part with her penknife. Then she pushed her arm into the tube of knitted cotton and slipped it over the wound, not too tight but enough to support her deadening limb.

Slowly she began to move herself towards the road, keeping her arm down so that the bite wound was below her heart.

Looking behind her she saw the tree was gone, carried away by the tornado.

The farmer who drove by in his truck an hour later was surprised to see this young girl stumbling down the road on her own.

The doctor on duty in the local hospital was astonished when upon arrival she produced a notebook containing a perfect drawing of a Western Rattlesnake.

‘That’s... what... bit me,’ she said, her arm badly swollen by now and her voice losing its strength.

‘Smart of you, noting everything down like that,’ he said as he injected the antivenom. ‘Rattler venom can kill in two hours. If we’d wasted any time trying to identify the species, well...’

Which was why from that day on Ruby Redfort resolved to know every snake by the pattern of its skin – such knowledge might just save your life.