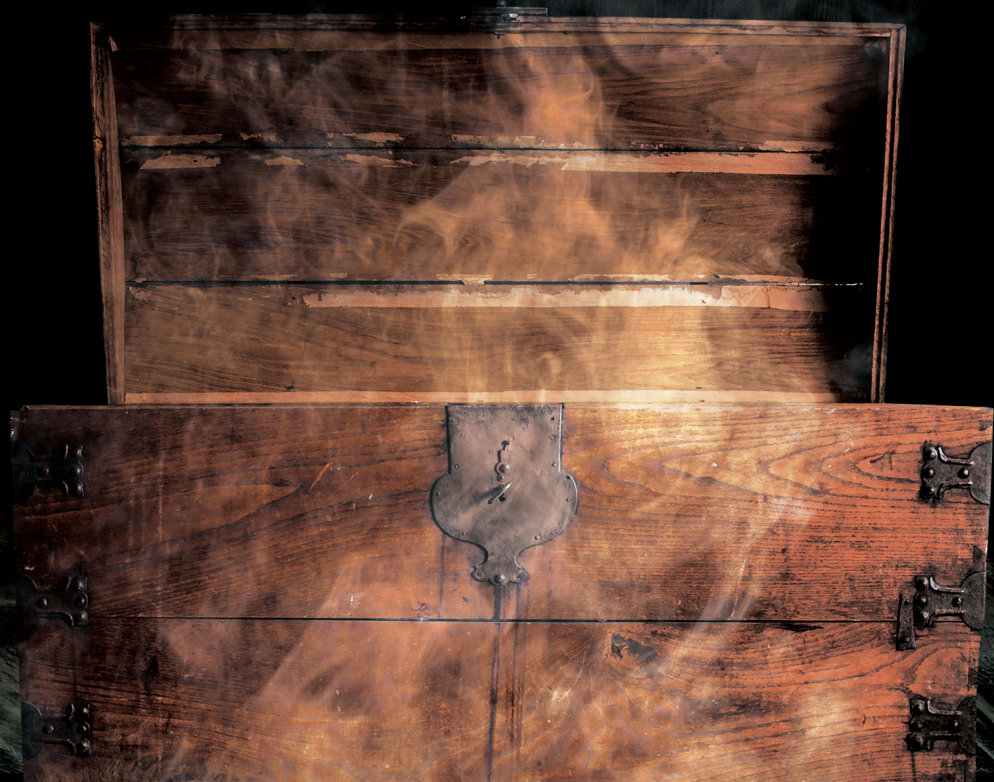




Finding

APEMAN

M. J. Higgins



CHAPTER 1

Convoy's house reeks. I could get high just standing in his living room. I look around while he's filling my order. Hundreds of plants on makeshift sawhorse tables. Grow lights. Fans. Classic hard rock thumping in the background.

I've been here a few times. It's still impressive. He's got an outside grow too, hidden under the redwood trees. Or so he tells me. The location is secret. He doesn't want people ripping him off.

"Here you go." Convoy emerges from a bedroom. He hands me a paper sack. With his long beard, fat belly, and overalls, he looks like Santa Claus. Or maybe Santa Claus's grungy brother.

"Thanks." I take it from him.

"Almost trimming season," he says. "Want a job?"

"Maybe." My friend Eric told me trimming pays good, but it's tedious. And I'm always worried about getting busted. There's a California medical certificate tacked to Convoy's living room wall. This is clearly more than

FINDING APEMAN

what's legal. I'm nervous. "So, see ya," I say. Then I head to the door.

"Hey, Diego," he says. "Got a minute?"

"Not really."

"Come on. I want to show you something. You'll appreciate this."

I take a breath. I want to leave. But I'm curious enough to say, "Okay. A minute."

I follow Convoy's wide butt down a long hallway. Turn to the right. He stops in a small room pasted on the back of the house. That's typical for the old houses around here. Lots of add-ons. What's not so typical is what's in the room. Beakers. Bunsen burners. Scales. Chemicals. I glue myself in the doorway. Don't want to get any closer.

"What is it?" I ask, although I have a good idea.

"Meth." Convoy grins. "I'm branching out."

"Is it safe?" The lab looks sloppy to me. Like it could blow up any second.

He shrugs. "It's safe if you know what you're doing."

"Don't you make enough money with weed?"

"There's never enough, son. I'm supporting an ex-wife and four kids. Anyway, how much more trouble can I get into?"

He has a point. But now I'm even more nervous. "I have to go."

"I've got some ready," he says. "Nice quality." He pulls

two tiny bags from his pocket. White powder sparkles inside. “Try it. Give one away. Let me know what you think about it.”

“No thanks.”

“Are you sure? It will sell itself.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m just ... I’m not into it,” I say.

He shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

I’m out of there. Convoy’s pit bull and Rottweiler follow me down the front steps. I forget their names. I’d pet them, but I haven’t figure out if they’re friendly or just pretending. I shove the bag of weed into my backpack. Ride my bike down Convoy’s gravel driveway to the dirt road.

It rained this morning. The road is muddy and slick. Redwood trees tower over me, filtering out the sunlight. It takes all of my focus not to slide and take a header.

A mile later I reach the paved highway. The emerald forest turns into pastures. I ride past dairy farms. Sheep farms. Goat farms. The cheese factory where my aunt works. Into the town of Seton, where cows, sheep, and goats way outnumber people.

I park my bike next to our duplex. Lock it to the gas meter. I want to keep the bike in my room, but my aunt births a cow (heh) when I get mud in the house.

I head straight to my room. Rummage in the corner of my closet. Toss shoes and my soccer ball off the old wooden toy box. Slide it across the floor. Pull the sandwich

FINDING APEMAN

bags and scale out from under a stuffed tiger and an old Xbox. Convoy bought the scale for me. After I explained my aunt and dad would not understand why a seventeen-year-old needed a scale.

I set a clean sheet of drawing paper on the floor. Carefully measure out several one-ounce bags. I like this part. It's like a meditation. Weigh weed. Seal weed in sandwich bags. Layer bags in toy box. It gives me time to think. Not always a good thing. But I do it anyway.

I think about Convoy and his new meth lab. Seems like a risk, but what do I know? He's right. He's already in major trouble if he gets busted. He's also right about meth selling itself. Lots of kids at school use it. Adults too. People who buy my weed often ask if I can get meth for them.

But no. No way. I'm afraid I'd like it. Get hooked. Anyway, I don't need a lot of money. Just enough to support my weed habit. Buy a few art supplies. Save for tuition to art school.

My phone dings. It's a text from Tanya. "U home? I'm alone XO XO <3"

I text back, "Cool. See u in a few"

My task done, I set aside two bags. One for me, one for Tanya. I put the remaining weed and scale in the bottom of the toy box. Put the toys back inside. And return the box to the closet. Layer the shoes and ball on top. Close the door.

Shake the scraps of weed from the drawing paper onto joint paper. Add more from my baggie. Roll it. Stick it in my pocket.

I walk down the block to Tanya's apartment. Give her a freebie bag. Sit on her bed. Smoke the joint. Get blissfully high. Listen to a new song she downloaded. Talk about stuff. Laugh. Eat pork rinds, the only snack food in her family's kitchen.

I sketch Tanya's portrait on the inside cover of her notebook. I love how her dark brown hair curves in this perfect arc around her cheek and under her chin. And she gets this pouty look that's sexy and evil and innocent, all at the same time. I hold the drawing up for her when I'm finished. "What do you think?"

She stares at it. "You made me into a cartoon."

"Well, yeah, what else? But it's a good cartoon, right?"

She takes the notebook from me. Studies it. Slowly smiles. "It's awesome. I look like Cat Woman. Or Batgirl. I'm fierce!"

Fierce. That's it. I lean my head against the wall. Take a deep breath. Life is good.

Then I make the mistake of telling her about Convoy's meth lab. Her eyes grow wide. "He'll start you off for free," she says. "Can you get me some?"

Then we argue. And life isn't so good.

I walk home, my high wearing off.

CHAPTER 2

My aunt's in the kitchen when I step through the back door. "What's for dinner?" I ask. I'm starving. Pork rinds only go so far. I look in the pots on the stove.

"Get your nose out of there," she says in her thick Spanish accent. She threatens me with a wooden spoon. "Spaghetti."

"Spaghetti! Awesome."

She eyes me. Guess my enthusiasm was over-the-top.

"Did you weed the front yard like I asked?" she says.

Weed. I laugh.

"What is wrong with you, Diego?"

"Nothing. Sorry. No, I did not *weed*. I'll do it tomorrow."

"So what did you do all day?" she asks.

I pause. "Homework. Went to Tanya's."

"You need to get more exercise. Whatever happened to that soccer club?"

"Tobias dropped out. Then there weren't enough members. Coach Nickel wanted to quit anyway."

She turns back to the stove. Stirs.

“I rode my bike today,” I tell her.

“Saints be praised.”

The front door opens and closes. “I’m home!”

Dad! I trot to the living room. “I didn’t know you’d be home today.”

We hug. He pats my back. “Job ended early.” His accent is as thick as my aunt’s. It would be easier for them to speak Spanish. But I was born in the U.S. They’ve always spoken English. They want me to fit in. The only Spanish I’ve learned from them is *tía* (aunt). Everything else I’ve learned in Spanish class at school. White kids can’t believe I’m not acing that class.

“How long till you go out again?” I ask.

“A few days.”

Dad works as a labor foreman. He goes wherever crops need picking. Farmers hire Dad to tell workers what to do. Something’s always ripening in California. So he’s always away from home. It’s March now. Asparagus and avocado season.

“Long drive from Sacramento.” He presses his back and winces. “When’s dinner?”

“Ten minutes!” Tía calls from the kitchen.

“Good,” he says. “Then I’m going to bed.” He must see the disappointed look on my face. It would be fine if he was a jerk and I hated him. But I happen to like my dad. I wish

FINDING APEMAN

he were home more. “It’s Saturday,” he says. “I thought you’d have a million things to do.”

I do. But if he’ll only be here a few days, I’d rather stay home. “We could watch some TV,” I say.

He smiles. Pats my arm. “I would just go to sleep.”

He does look tired. Probably started driving at dawn. “Well. There is a party in town. I was going to take Tanya.”

“Are you walking?” he asks.

I nod.

“Then go. Have a good time. But be home by midnight and no drinking. Tell Tanya hi for me.”

We eat dinner. Dad’s an amazing storyteller. He somehow makes working in asparagus fields seem like a big adventure, though I know it’s really hard work. If his life had turned out differently, I think he would have been an actor. Or a writer. “How are the studies?” he asks.

Oh man. I’m always afraid he’s going to bring this up. I could sure use another hit right now.

“Diego?” he says.

“Fine.”

He looks at Tía. She shrugs. “No notes home,” she says. “No phone calls from school.”

Dad sighs. “I added money to your college fund this week. Have you been exploring schools?”

As a matter of fact, I have. Just not the ones he wants me to go to. “A few,” I answer.

“Which ones?”

I drag my fork through the spaghetti sauce on my plate. Make a crosshatch pattern. It looks interesting.

“Diego,” Dad says. “Which colleges?”

“California College of the Arts. Art Center. CalArts. A few others.” I crosshatch over my crosshatches, making little squares.

“You know I want more for you.”

I glance up from my plate. “I know.” There’s nothing more to say. We’re never going to agree on this. I’m not cut out to be a doctor. Or a lawyer. Or an engineer. The things he’d like me to be.

“Well, you’re still a junior. You have a little while to decide. So let’s not argue.” He pushes away from the table. Looks like an old man as he slowly gets to his feet.

I hate disappointing him.

“Thank you for dinner, Marta,” he says. “It was delicious. Good night.”

“Good night,” Tía and I say.

I carry dishes to the kitchen. Then go to my room. Open the toy box. Remove three bags and shove them into my jacket pockets. I’ll share one at the party. Sell the other two.

I’ll never earn enough money to pay for art school by myself. It’s too expensive. I’m hoping by the time I graduate, my father will come around. I’ll convince him

FINDING APEMAN

I'm doing the right thing. He'll be proud of me. Want to support me.

The Scott twins' party is so-so. The usual kids from school are there. Plus some local stoners. Two bikers crash it, setting everyone on edge. But they settle in. There's a keg, and Chris Hanes brings a bottle of whiskey he stole from home. I follow Dad's directions and don't drink. But I smoke my butt off and pass my weed around. Sell both bags.

Then the hard drugs start showing up on the coffee table. It always happens. That's why I'm sitting on the other side of the room. My arm around Tanya. She makes a move to get up. I hold her.

"Let me go," she says.

"Why? Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom! God, Diego."

I loosen my grip. Watch her traipse down the hall.

"Wow, possessive much?" says her friend Anise. She jumps up to go with Tanya.

I could explain. How Tanya's entire family is addicted to drugs. How Tanya is probably a snort away from the same fate. But why should I? If Anise doesn't know that already, then she's not a very good friend.

One of my joints circles back around. I take a long hit. Man, Convoy grows the best stuff. I lean my head back. Close my eyes. This awesome apeman appears in my mind. Kind of like Big Foot, only he's part robot. A bionic

apeman. Swinging through the trees. Shooting the bad guys—evil alien monkeys—with a bionic laser gun built into his arm.

Oh man. I have got to draw this before I forget.

I open my eyes. Wish I'd saved room in my jacket for my sketchbook. Look around for one of the Scotts to ask to borrow a pencil and paper. That's when I see Tanya. Sitting at the coffee table.



Finding

APEMAN

I head straight to my room. Rummage in the corner of my closet. Toss shoes and my soccer ball off the old wooden toy box. Slide it across the floor. Pull the sandwich bags and scale out from under a stuffed tiger and an old Xbox. Convoy bought the scale for me. After I explained my aunt and dad would not understand why a seventeen-year-old needed a scale.

Gravel
Road™
RURAL

 **SADDLEBACK**
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING
www.sdlback.com

ISBN: 978-1-68021-062-0



9 781680 210620