

The passage that follows has been taken from 'Pick Your Poison' by Lauren Child. It tells the story of thirteen year old Ruby Redfort, who is cycling to her grandmother's ranch in the open grasslands of America, an area known for tornados. Despite a storm being predicted, she thinks she can make it in time... but she is wrong.

Passage

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 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 anti-venom. ‘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.

* a ranch is an American word for a farm