

“The Beautiful Ashes of Gomez Gomez solidifies Buck Storm’s place among the unique literary voices of our day. Infused with humor, imagination, and poetic beauty, Buck’s writing is an absolute delight. I’ve read all his books, and his characters have taken up permanent residence in my memory. They come back to me at unexpected moments and invariably leave me smiling. Anyone who travels into the wild, wacky, wonderful world of Gomez Gomez is in for an unforgettable adventure.”

ANN TATLOCK, novelist, blogger, and children’s book author

“Yet another treasure from a writer whose gifts only get richer and more compelling with each new story he brings to life. Buck paints such masterful word pictures that his characters breathe and their world becomes yours!”

RANDY STONEHILL, singer-songwriter

“I’ve never read a phrase from Buck Storm that wasn’t time well spent—and worth reading again. A topflight storyteller, Storm pits his protagonist—an eccentric, homeless widower—against a powerful and wealthy small-town businessman. The engaging story has readers quickly joining the cast of funky supporting characters on the streets of Paradise, Arizona, grooving on creative plot twists and wondering if this hero-and-villain drama can ever be resolved.”

RANDALL MURPHREE, editor of the *AFA Journal*

“From a small Southwest town to the island of Corfu, Storm’s quirky characters take us to a place where love, compassion, and redemption may seem out of reach but are always within our grasp. From a cameo from Elvis to a story within a story, *The Beautiful Ashes of Gomez Gomez* becomes more than a metaphor. Is Paradise, Arizona, real? We can only hope.”

BILL HIGGS, author of *Eden Hill*

“Whether it’s a dustup in Arizona or a splash in the Mediterranean, redemption and romance are on the rise. Prepare to be lifted up on angel’s wings with this latest novel from Buck Storm.”

ROBERT CASE, pastor of Calvary Chapel Eastside



Ballads of Paradise

The Beautiful Ashes of Gomez Gomez

The Sound the Sun Makes

Venus Sings the Blues

Ballads of Paradise • I

THE BEAUTIFUL ASHES OF GOMEZ GOMEZ

BUCK STORM



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The Beautiful Ashes of Gomez Gomez

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CHAPTER ONE

GOMEZ GOMEZ TALKED TO SNAKES. Something many might've found odd had the subject in question not been Gomez Gomez. Even as a kid he was considered a half bubble off plumb.

Their loss, he figured. A simple problem—people didn't know how to listen. He couldn't blame them, of course. The world at large, the ones outside the glass looking in, had no way of knowing. No, it wasn't their fault. They had no real perspective. No foundation in the exceptional.

Not like him. He understood the exceptional. He'd breached the glass. After all, he'd been married to Angel. At least before she'd learned how to die.

The other thing they didn't understand—couldn't understand—was that Gomez Gomez never initiated the conversation.

And the thing about snakes, they always had a lot to say.

The shrill phrases of the garter snakes, the machine-gun staccato of the red racers—you couldn't get a word in edgewise with those guys—the coughing rasp of the gopher snake. The big rattler, five feet at least, scared him with his dusty slur, but his stories were by far the most interesting.

This afternoon a huge king snake stretched himself out on the log under the mesquite tree and regaled Gomez Gomez with tales of the hunt in his comfortable, booming baritone.

Gomez Gomez sipped from a paper bag-wrapped Thunderbird wine

bottle then arched an eyebrow at the big king. “You told me that one before.”

“Did I?” the snake said.

“You told me most of these before. You have a bad habit of repeating yourself.”

“You know you’re cranky when you drink?”

“Then I’m always cranky.”

“Good point.”

“And don’t judge me.”

“Why would I? Still, you must know you’re killing yourself.”

“Not fast enough, you ask me.” Gomez Gomez took another pull. “Besides, Thunderbird is first-rate snake-hearing juice. Nothin’ like it. Seems like that’s something you’d be all for.”

“Maybe, but I worry. What would Angel say?”

“She don’t say nothing anymore. She never does. Can’t even dream about her. And leave her out of it, anyway.”

“I’m just saying that some ghosts have heavier footsteps than others.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The snake lifted his head, flicked his tongue against the clear Arizona autumn air. “So what’s on the paper?”

“What paper?”

“The one in your hand that has you so upset.”

Gomez Gomez squinted an eye down at the notice. “I was trying to forget about it.”

“How’s that working out?”

“Your reminding me doesn’t help.”

“Call me curious. Sue me.”

Gomez Gomez held the sheet up to the blue sky. The sun shining through the print made it unreadable. He wished it would burst into flame. “It’s an eviction notice.”

“A what notice?”

“Eviction. I’m evicted. I’m an evictee. Somebody stapled it to the front door. Means I’m supposed to leave.”

“What front door?”

“My front door. What front door do you think?”

The snake’s eyes were glassy black beads. “You call that a front door?”

Gomez Gomez turned and studied his makeshift shack.

“It’s a cracked piece of old plywood with some ratty tarp hanging on it,” the snake said.

“Well, you know what they say, right? One man’s castle and all that.”

“So . . . are you going to? Evict or whatever?”

Gomez Gomez took another slug from the bottle. “I ain’t going nowhere. I got no plans of evicting in the near or distant future.”

“What if they arrest you and put you in prison? Or wherever they put crazy people. What then?”

“You’re a real ray of sunshine, you know that?”

“What are friends for?”

“I said I ain’t going nowhere.”

“Well, I am. It’s getting late.”

“I ain’t keeping you.”

“Couldn’t if you tried, buddy.” Another flick and the king slid off into the brush.

Gomez Gomez offered a lazy wave. “Adios then.”

He dozed into the afternoon. Let the shadows grow. The dozing helped him forget about the notice—and the rocks.

The rocks came at ten minutes after three, right on schedule. Not big rocks—they couldn’t throw big rocks all the way down from the road—but big enough to hurt if one connected. And one did. A light flashed in his skull. He put his hand to his forehead. Blood oozed through his fingers and dripped into his eye. Normally he’d have crawled into the plywood-and-tarp shack that served as home at the sound of the last school bell. But the sun and booze . . . too late now. Thankfully the other rocks pelted into the pine trees around his camp then stopped.

Adolescent laughter rang through the trees and moved on up the road.

“You missed, you little freaks!” Gomez Gomez shouted toward the sound.

More laughter.

“Try coming down here sometime, how about?” Gomez Gomez touched his forehead again and winced. “You missed . . .”

The daily ritual. He could picture it. Get out of school, shell the wino with rocks, then head home to homework, supper, family, and normal.

To the snakeless life on the other side of the glass.

“You’re bleeding.”

The voice made Gomez Gomez jump. Then again he was jumpy these days. Mostly ’cause the rattlesnake had a way of sneaking up on a guy.

Not the rattlesnake this time, though. A kid. Hard to tell his age. Maybe thirteen? Whatever that gawky, pimple-faced age was—yeah, thirteen sounded about right. He wore heavy work boots, jeans, and a faded Brad Paisley concert tee. Feathery-looking brown hair, unevenly cropped, stuck out from his head at a dozen different angles.

The kid blinked owl eyes at him from behind thick plastic-framed glasses. “You’re bleeding.”

“You already said that.”

“From the rocks.”

Gomez Gomez considered. “Anyone ever tell you you have a keen sense of the obvious?”

The owl eyes blinked again. “No. Not really, I don’t think.”

“You know what that means? Keen sense of the obvious?”

“I’m not stupid. It means I’m good at recognizing what’s right in front of my face. Are you the guy who talks to snakes?”

Gomez paused. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“On if I’m in a talking mood. Sometimes I just listen. Who are you? One of the rock throwers?”

“No, that’s Travis Gart.”

“Travis Gart throws a lot of rocks for one person.”

The kid shrugged, his shoulders bony beneath his tee. “He has followers. It comes down to the same thing. They wouldn’t do it if he didn’t.”

“And you’re not a follower?”

“No.”

“What are you then?”

“They say you’re a drunk. Are you?”

Gomez Gomez scratched his chin stubble. “I imagine. At least drinking’s what I mostly do.”

“Are you drunk right now?”

He took inventory. “Hard to tell. Most likely. What’s your name?”

A second of hesitation. “Bones.”

“Bones? What kind of name is that?”

“It’s what people call me. You got a problem with it?”

“What does your mom call you? She call you Bones?”

The kid shrugged again. “She don’t call me nothing. What do they say to you? The snakes?”

“All kinds of things. They’re very unpredictable animals. And fairly good conversationalists.”

Bones stood and turned his face to the sun, closing his eyes. He stayed that way for a long moment, then spoke, eyes still closed. “They’re kicking you out. Did you know that?”

“The snakes?”

“No, the city. ’Cause of Sonny Harmon.”

Confused anger picked at the edges of the Thunderbird numbness. “Yeah, I got a paper on my door. But that don’t mean anything.”

The kid turned his owl eyes back. “Harmon Chevrolet wants to expand. That means you have to go somewhere else. Or else.”

“Sonny Harmon can shove his car lot where the Arizona sun don’t shine. Anyway, I can’t go somewhere else. There is nowhere else. I have to be here.”

“Because your wife died here, right? That’s what people say.”

“I have to be here, that’s all.” Gomez Gomez said.

“They also say you’re crazy.”

“Maybe they’re crazy. You ever think of that? Maybe you’re crazy.”

“Nah, I think it’s you.”

Gomez Gomez sighed, squinted down the neck of his T-bird bottle, then took a swig. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

The kid gazed down at him. “Anyway, they’re gonna make you go. If Sonny Harmon wants this place, he’s gonna get it. And he says you’re just a drunk.”

“Nobody’s just nothin’.”

“Maybe not. Still, you don’t matter to Sonny Harmon. Nobody matters to Sonny Harmon. Doesn’t matter if you’re the president of the United States or the baby Jesus.”

“Well I ain’t either one. And I ain’t going nowhere, neither. You tell them that.”

“Not up to me to tell anybody anything, man. Plus Sonny wouldn’t listen no matter who talked to him. What Sonny wants, Sonny gets. And you’re a drunk. A homeless. A nobody.”

“I ain’t homeless. I live here.”

Bones looked around. “It ain’t bad, actually. Nobody telling you what to do, right?”

“Right.”

“Except Sonny Harmon, I guess.”

Gomez Gomez crumpled the notice and tossed it on the smoldering ashes of his campfire. It smoked but didn’t catch. “Yeah, except Sonny Harmon.”

Bones picked his nose and looked at his finger. “Anyway, you want those guys to quit throwing rocks?”

The change of subject caught Gomez Gomez off guard. “Why? You gonna stop them?”

“Maybe. If I want to. You know, if I feel like it.”

Gomez Gomez ran an eye over the boy’s thin frame. “How you gonna do that? You can’t weigh more than a duck. Maybe half a duck.”

The lopsided grin that came to the boy’s face didn’t touch his eyes. “Because I’m Bones, man.”

He left in the opposite direction of the king snake.

CHAPTER TWO

FATHER JAKE MORALES WAS NOT a sudden man. When change came knocking, if it wanted to stay it had to earn its keep. Water through granite, carting away sediment in tiny increments as it whittled the canyons of his heart.

Paradise, Arizona, fit his slow burn like an old pair of boots.

Habanero peppers, coffee, sunrise over the mountains. The sun's slow track across the sky before it cast its last color across the desert below. Starlight flickering through rodeo dust. A neon goddess standing watch over the Venus Motel out on Highway 30, her light fading as it reached pastel fingers down a stretch of empty road . . .

Yeah, Paradise fit Jake fine. The town lay along a highway that wound along an out-of-the-way mountain range in the southeast part of the state. Scrub oak, sage, and pine competed for real estate. Cowboys and hippies, young and old for the most part got along, the soundtrack supplied by Lightnin' Hopkins country blues picked out on Willie's old Spanish guitar.

Jake sighed and looked out his office window, deep-set high in the thick adobe wall of the Jardin de Dios Mission, at a view he'd taken in a thousand times. Autumn shone bright and the warmth of the Arizona sun almost broke through his cloud-shrouded thoughts—almost. There'd been a time he'd been comfortable with his own company. Years and another lifetime ago. Back *before*. These days he tended to shove everything into a locked room in the back of his brain. Maybe

not the healthiest choice but a guy did what he had to do in the name of survival.

His window faced the rear of the mission, away from the old downtown. Sun glinted off an elderly Airstream trailer below, polished bright by sun and wind. Beyond the trailer, a dust devil whipped across the dirt baseball field. Pine trees peppered up the mountain beneath an expanse of blue, broken only by a distant streak of white jet exhaust.

Jake loved his town. He loved the way it loitered and lazed in the afternoon stillness. Loved the way it smelled, sounded, and breathed a life of its own. His family had made this place their home for generations.

Then why do I feel homeless?

He closed his eyes and listened. Plane engines rumbled just under the predictable drone of insects and birdsong.

Post-industrial Earth—a planet devoid of silence. Where had he read that? Some article somewhere. Even in the middle of the ocean, they said, you couldn't be free from the insistent aural press of mechanized progress.

Then again, Jake wouldn't know. He'd been to rodeo arenas across the country, yes, but never the middle of the ocean. Maybe he'd ask Doc next time they talked. Doc was probably in the middle of the ocean this very moment. The thought of his brother brought a needed smile. He missed the guy. But Doc and his new wife were off sailing somewhere in the Caribbean, a long, long way away.

His stomach growled. He should go to Shorty's and get something to eat. Or maybe not—Honey would be there and she'd already been too much on his mind.

Jake shifted his focus outward again with effort. By the ball field, a couple of teenagers rattled up on bikes and leaned them against the chain-link dugout. One said something and the other laughed, but they were too far away to make out any words. Thirty seconds later they were joined by a cloud of dust with a primer-gray Toyota pickup wrapped in the middle. The truck skidded to a stop behind the back-stop, and wind pushed the dust on across the field. A couple of guys

tumbled out and grabbed a bat bag and gloves out of the truck bed. Looked like the on-again, off-again afternoon ball game was on again. Jake would most likely join them after a while. They'd laugh about him playing ball in his cassock and battered old cowboy hat, but they'd be glad to have him. Probably even fight over whose team he'd be on. Not that he was Doc. Or anywhere near as good. Doc had taken the skill and passion he'd developed on that dirt field all the way to Fenway Park and the major leagues. Jake shared his little brother's athleticism and passion, but he'd chosen to channel it into a fairly successful rodeo career, touring the rodeo grounds of America on the top deck of a saddle bronc. He had a scrapbook of X-rays to prove it. But, hey, no regrets.

Behind him, his office door banged open with a dull thump of pine. Jake didn't need to turn. "What's up, Early?"

"*Detective* Early to you, amigo." The voice rough but cheerful, a wool blanket of smoker's gravel around the edges.

"But you still can't say *Father* Jake?"

A low chuckle. "How'd you know it was me? You have some kind of spiritual super-vision or something?"

"Don't need it. You're the only one who doesn't knock. Even Father Enzo knocks."

On the field the boys started throwing a ball around.

A chair squeaked as Early sat. "So I'll come to confession. You can give me penance or that rosary deal. Take me over your knee and spank me, whatever it is you spooky old crows do."

Jake sank into his desk chair. Across from him, Early grinned his raggedy Early grin—same one Jake had seen since kindergarten, one incisor tooth turned at an angle. His friend laced his fingers behind his head and stretched the considerable length of his legs out in front of him. Early Pines, carved by desert wind out of wood and leather. Six foot five without his boots on, lean, muscular, and hard as nails. A quarter Navajo but he looked more. Dark hair to his shoulders. An old scar tracing up from one corner of his mouth, giving the illusion of a perpetual smirk. His hawk nose, flattened more than once during his life, angled to the left. Jake could remember at least two of the

occasions of injury. One a headbutt from an angry steer and another a parking lot fight behind an Amarillo bar. Jake didn't like to think about that fight. Early'd left the place with a busted face, but the huge drunk cowboy who'd challenged him barely left at all.

"Old crow?" Jake said.

"I say that in the most loving way. I heard Old Crow whiskey was named after a priest."

"No, you didn't."

"Yeah, I didn't. So what's up in God's world?"

"Talked to Doc last week. He's gonna be a dad, can you picture that?"

Early grunted a laugh and scratched his chin. "Uncle Jake . . . Who would have thought?"

"He said if it's a boy they're gonna name him after me."

"I don't know, 'Old Crow' just sets the kid up for ridicule."

"You ever consider taking your act on the road?"

"You'd miss me too much. Hey, if it's a girl maybe they can call her Earlyina."

"Uh-huh. Because Earlyina is just beautiful."

"Well, *I'm* beautiful. What can I say?" Early shifted his boots up to Jake's desk, resting one on top of the other. "Anyway, we need to talk."

"You comfortable?"

"Very."

"All right, I want you to be happy. What are we talking about?"

Early's dark eyes glittered above flat, pock-scarred cheeks. He took his trucker's hat off his head and tossed it onto the toe of his boot. The logo settled facing Jake. *Kiss Me, I'm Baptist*.

"Why d'you look like that?" Early said.

"Since when are you a Baptist?"

Early shrugged. "Since the Catholics don't give out free hats. Now, why do you look like that?"

Jake walked over to a battered pine sideboard and poured two cups from the same Mr. Coffee maker he'd had since college. He dumped a liberal amount of sugar into one and handed it to Early. He kept the

black for himself and dropped back into his chair. "You know you've gotten all cocky since you made detective?"

"Do I get a spoon?"

"Use your finger."

Early did. "I wasn't cocky before?"

Jake sipped. "You got a point."

"You gonna answer my question?"

Jake sighed. "Why do I look like what, Detective Pines?"

"I don't know, man, old."

"I'm thirty-one, same as you."

"Uh-huh. But you look old and whipped."

"Thanks for the boost, buddy."

"I'm taking confession today, amigo. Special deal for priests. You get half off. Talk to me."

Jake rubbed the bridge of his nose. "It's nothing. Just the past tapping me on the shoulder, that's all. What's up? You didn't come here to talk about me."

"Looks to me like the past roundhouse kicked you to the back of your head. You thinking about Gomez Gomez?"

"You really want to know?"

"I already know, but yeah."

"I'm pretty much always thinking about Gomez Gomez. But I've been thinking about Honey too."

"Honey? As in you-see-her-at-Shorty's-all-the-time-and-act-like-you-never-practically-got-married-to-her Honey?"

"That would be the one, yes."

"Why're you thinking about her? Daydreaming about women can't be healthy in your line of work."

"It's way past stupid. The other day she brushed my hand when she was pouring my coffee."

"So?"

"So . . . It's hard to explain. It brought back memories for some reason. Old times and all that."

"You miss her. It's natural. Honey's cool. And beautiful."

“You have to say that out loud?”

“Sorry, man. Facts are facts. I proposed to her just this morning.”

“How many times is that now?”

“Never say die.”

“I don’t know. I still feel bad the way it all happened. Feel bad for her.”

“Uh-huh. And yourself, I’m thinking. Look, nobody questions why you became a priest. Maybe I think you’re a little crazy, but I don’t question. You got your reasons and you gotta do what you gotta do. I’m sure Honey feels the same, you know?”

“Maybe she does. Thing is, we never talk about it.”

“What’s done is done. What good would it do to talk about it?”

“You’re right. Forget I even brought it up.”

“Listen, man, I’m just saying you got friends when you need us, Honey included, that’s all.”

“I know. And I appreciate it.”

“You sure?”

“Sure that I appreciate it?”

“Sure that you *know* it.”

“I know it. I’m telling you, I’m fine.”

“If you say so. So now for the bad news. Speaking of the past, you need to go with me to talk to Gomez Gomez.”

Jake paused. “What’s up with Gomez Gomez?”

“Town council wants to kick him out of the bushes.”

“What do you mean kick him out?”

“I mean Sonny Harmon wants to expand his stupid car lot and Gomez Gomez is in the way.”

“That land is publicly owned. Sonny can’t have it just because he wants it.”

“If the place is a car lot, it generates property taxes. If it’s vacant land, it generates snakes and dust. One’s good for the town’s bottom line, and the other’s only good for Gomez Gomez. Guess who wins? I’m sure they’re happy to shuffle the fine print if it makes a few bucks. And as far as they’re concerned, it’s Gomez Gomez. Who cares about him?”

“Everybody cares about him. Because everybody loved Angel.”

“It is what it is, man. Angel’s gone. And Gomez Gomez is . . . well, he’s Gomez Gomez.”

“I don’t know what I can do. You know I’ve been trying to talk to him for years. He doesn’t even acknowledge I exist unless it’s to cuss me out or throw something at me.”

Early sipped his coffee and grimaced. “But he’s never been being kicked out before. He needs his friends right now.”

Jake picked up a paper clip, studied it without seeing it, then dropped it back onto the desk. “He’s been down there a long time. Maybe this is finally a way to end it.”

“Maybe. What’s it been? Four, five years since Angel?”

“Five. Long time to be living alone in that shack.”

“And it’s a long time for you to beat yourself up for something that was an accident.”

Jake met Early’s gaze. “So you my therapist now?”

“Nah, man. But sometimes I think guilt has got you buried.”

“Maybe it’s not guilt. Maybe it’s honor.”

“And maybe with you there’s a blurry line between the two.”

“Why can’t you talk to him? You’re his best friend.”

Early threw the Early grin. “Nope, I’m your best friend. And I am going to talk to him. You and me together are gonna talk to him.”

“Why me?”

“Because he always listened to you. Even when you were just plain old Jake. Busting broncs instead of saving souls.”

“You were there too. Plus that was then, this is now. These days he’d rather stick a knife in my chest and laugh while I bleed than let me buy him a cup of coffee.”

Early shrugged. “Maybe we all traveled together, but you were always the smart one. The thinker of the bunch. Gomez Gomez got what little brains he started out with pounded out on the bulls, and us bulldoggers aren’t especially known for our essay-writing skills.”

“That’s not true. Besides, those were different times. You’re a detective now. You have authority.”

“Not so different when it comes to the three of us.”

“A *lot* different. Have you seen him lately?”

Early nodded. “I go in there and talk to him. Take him a little cash sometimes, a little food. He’s mostly drunk or on his way to drunk. Says he talks to snakes all day. You know the Navajos say snakes are bad luck? I’m pretty sure I agree with them. And even if they’re not bad luck, it’s just plain weird. He probably talks to Angel too. Guy’s losing it—or lost it already.”

“We’re talking about Gomez Gomez here. I’m not sure he ever had it to lose.”

Early’s chair squeaked as he shifted. “Look, man, that whole Angel thing was a bad deal, but what can you do? When you gonna move on?”

“I don’t know. Maybe when Gomez Gomez gets his world back. I’ve tried—I’m trying.”

“Well, right now he’s down at that camp of his scratching around in the dirt for Angel’s ghost.”

“Don’t you know I think about that every day?”

“So here’s your chance to help fix it—maybe fix yourself in the process. Go talk to him with me. It could be good for both of you.”

“You know I’d do anything I could to help him, but the only thing he really wants is Angel back, and that’s something I can’t give him.”

“Nobody can. All I’m asking is you go over there and help me try to talk him out of the bushes. You don’t need to call fire from heaven or turn water to wine, just be there, man.”

“That shack is all Gomez Gomez has got left. Sonny Harmon already owns half this town. Why can’t the guy leave well enough alone?”

“Because he’s Sonny Harmon, what more do you need? So you gonna come or sit here and daydream about Honey?”

“Of course I’m gonna come. You knew I would before you asked.”

A tap sounded at the doorjamb. Jake glanced over. “Father Enzo, come in.”

“Join the party, father, there’s gonna be clowns,” Early said.

Only a few years shy of eighty, Father Enzo’s lanky frame, still mostly black hair, and smooth brown face belied his age. He moved with the

limber ease of a man half his age as he entered Jake's office carrying a worn notebook and dropped into a chair next to Early. Though he'd been in the States for years, he'd never quite shaken his Italian accent. "I never really understood clowns. They scare the children."

"Nobody understands clowns," Early said. "We would have had dancing girls, but this being a church and all . . ."

Father Enzo chuckled and patted Early's knee. "How's police work? You busy shaking down small-business owners and pestering old women with parking tickets?"

"Somebody's got to do it. Jake's busy polishing his halo, and I'm sure eating Jell-O and watching *Matlock* reruns sucks up all the hours in your day."

Father Enzo laughed. "I'm going to pray for your soul, boy."

"I won't pretend it doesn't need it." Early indicated the notebook in the priest's lap. "Are you a fan of the Man of Steel?"

Father Enzo glanced down. "Ah yes, Superman . . . Just a little project of mine. I found the notebook in the donation bin."

"Father, would you like coffee?" Jake said.

"No, no. I was only coming to talk to you about . . . that thing we talked about."

"Sounds serious," Early said. "Should I step out?"

"Oh no! Nothing serious. Just an old man's indulgence. I wanted to read something to Jake, but it can wait. We'll do it tonight, yes?"

"You bet," Jake said. "I'll look forward to it."

"Sermon notes?" Early said.

The old priest shifted and offered a rueful grin. "Nothing so weighty as that. Just a story. Something I do to pass the evenings. But who knows? I'm a priest after all. Maybe someone will find a little comfort in the words I write. And Father Jake is an excellent sounding board." He tapped the notebook with an index finger. "This is a new one."

"You write stories?" Early said.

"Father Enzo is a budding novelist," Jake said.

"No joke? Paradise's own Louis L'Amour?"

"Who is Louis L'Amour?" Father Enzo said.

“He wrote cowboy stuff mostly,” Jake said. “Only books Early’s ever read.”

“Not true. Well, kind of true.”

Father Enzo patted his notebook. “This story is about two boys who grow up on Corfu—a beautiful island in the Ionian Sea. They are best friends, but very, very competitive. Much like you two in fact.”

“Let me guess, they fall for the same girl,” Early said.

“If I tell you that, it will ruin the story,” Father Enzo said. “But many things happen to these boys. There is a big fish.” He winked. “Maybe a girl too.”

“Where’s the Ionian Sea?” Early said.

“Ah, the Ionian Sea! So beautiful! Between Italy and Greece.”

“Corfu . . . I like it,” Early said. “What time should I be here?”

“Be here for what?” Jake said.

“To hear the story, genius. What do you think? Expand my horizons. Get a little culture.” Early scratched at his chin, eyes drifting a bit. “Maybe something to take our minds off stinking Sonny trying to bulldoze our friend’s shack.” He shifted back to Jake. “And off certain waitresses.”

“Waitresses?” Father Enzo said. “Your face is troubled, Father Jake. I would help if possible.”

Early answered for him. “Honey touched Jake’s hand.”

Jake sighed. “Early . . . don’t.”

Father Enzo steepled his fingers. Lines formed between his eyes. “Honey Hicks touched your hand . . .”

“Don’t listen to Early. He likes to stir the pot when he’s bored.”

“Honey is a beautiful girl,” Father Enzo said.

“It’s really nothing, father. Please, ignore him.”

Father Enzo’s brown eyes lingered on Jake, then he nodded. “All right, then what’s this about Sonny and bulldozers?”

Jake explained.

The old priest leaned back in his chair, craggy face thoughtful. “When did you hear about this deal with Sonny Harmon?”

Early leaned forward for his hat, rubbed at a spot on his boot, then put the hat on his head. “This morning. Town council met. The mayor

told Matthias they wanted Gomez Gomez out of his snake hole and Matthias punted it to me. He's probably scared of snakes."

"Matthias is your boss. It seems to me he can tell you to do whatever he wants," Father Enzo said.

"Yeah, but I'm *definitely* scared of snakes."

"Getting Gomez Gomez out and getting his head straight is the right thing, Sonny Harmon or not." Father Enzo rose. "I will pray our God leads you in His wisdom. Go with blessing. And tonight, Corfu."

"Tonight, Corfu!" Early said. "The Ionian sea and a big fish."

"But no cowboys," Father Enzo said.

"I'll suffer. But I'll live," Early said.

"Excellent. Now, you both go do what you have to do. And, Early, get your feet off the desk." The old priest closed the door behind him.

Early dropped his boots to the floor. "The guy's really not bad for an old crow."

"I'm pretty sure you're going to hell."

"Naw. God smiles on Baptists."

"You know, for his own good, you really should just go order Gomez Gomez out. Get him in some kind of facility."

"Maybe. But my gut says it needs to be slow. He'll lose it if he's pushed. Maybe even hurt himself. Plus the guy's our friend. I can't just go drag him out."

"Or because he's our friend that might be exactly what you should do."

"Let's just go feel the dude out. Then we'll talk about it."

Jake stood. "Fine, let's go. But let's at least get something to eat first. I'm starving."

"Shorty's?"

"That's what I was thinking. Aunt Katie's cooking today."

"Your Aunt Katie's always cooking. And we never go anyplace else anyway. You know Honey's working, right?"

"I've been avoiding her for a week. Enough's enough."

"Over bumping your hand?"

"Just leave it alone."

THE BEAUTIFUL ASHES OF GOMEZ GOMEZ

Early got up, wincing at some old leftover rodeo pain. “You’re the one that was sitting here all moony eyed. You thinking of hanging up the robe, amigo? That the deal?”

“You know it doesn’t work that way.”

Early laughed. “Well, pontiff, you better straighten out that halo. It’s looking a little crooked.”

CHAPTER THREE

“THE THING IS—MAYBE YOU don’t realize—you look like a lunatic the way you carry that can around,” the big rattlesnake slurred from the snake log.

Gomez Gomez stood and stretched, working a kink out of his back. “It’s not a can, it’s Angel.”

“Earth to GG . . . It’s a Folgers coffee can.”

“It’s Angel.”

“It’s a bunch of ashes—charcoal, dude. What a moron.”

“You’re a snake, what do you know about death anyway?”

“Um, you ever heard of a little joint called Eden?”

Gomez Gomez looked down at the Folgers can. Clutched like a football, tight as a wide receiver five yards from the end zone. “You know what’s weird? I can’t hardly drink when I’m holding her.”

“Why not? Who’s gonna know?”

“I don’t know, nobody. But I can’t.”

“You’re a real psycho, homey.”

Gomez Gomez didn’t argue the point. After all, he *was* talking to a rattlesnake. He set the Folgers can on a flat rock with gingered finesse, well away from the firepit, then picked up a Thunderbird bottle. He held it up. Almost a quarter of the liquid happiness remained. “What do you think about that Bones kid?”

“You seriously have to set her down first? Just to take a drink?”

“It’s easier. I already told you.”

“That Bones kid . . . I think he’s as much of a crackpot as you are. You two are made for each other.”

“You feel that way, why don’t you just bite me and get it over with?”

The snake slithered out of his coil and flattened himself against the sun. He offered a tired sigh. “I’m not in the mood. Besides, I find you mildly entertaining.”

“In other words, you’re not bored with me yet.”

“I guess not.”

Gomez Gomez tipped the bottle to the sky and took long gulps, draining it. He set it on the flat rock next to the Folgers can and studied the pair. He picked the bottle back up and tossed it deep into the brush. The snake didn’t move. Lying there like a stick pretending to be asleep. Stupid thing always did that.

“I know you’re not asleep. Don’t start fake snoring either.”

The snake might as well have been dead. Better for everybody if it was.

“You’re faking,” Gomez Gomez said.

“No, I’m not.”

“Your eyes are open.”

“Snakes don’t have eyelids. Didn’t you ever take biology?”

“You don’t? And you say I’m the freak?” A dangerous way to talk to the rattlesnake but the alcohol put Gomez Gomez in a mood. He picked up the Folgers can and ducked into his shack where he sat on a dented aluminum lawn chair and stared down at the makeshift urn in his lap.

The rattlesnake appeared in the doorway. “Why don’t you ever open it?”

“I already know what’s in it. I don’t need to see it again.”

“Yeah, a bunch of charcoal.”

“No. She’s beautiful.”

“Whatever. Anyway, I’m gonna split.”

“See ya,” Gomez Gomez said.

“I’m really leaving.”

“So you said.”

“Weirdo.” The snake slithered off toward the bushes.

“Lidless freak,” Gomez Gomez called after him.

He leaned down and set the Folgers can in its usual place, a shrine constructed of flat shale he’d carried up piece by piece from an old rockslide down by the river. He took a plastic Bic out of his coat pocket and lit the scattering of burned-down candles. He pulled a trucker’s wallet from under his dirty mattress and stared numbly at it. The hand tooling on its sides nearly worn away. Stitching frayed. With great care he opened it and pulled out a photo. A flat sunbeam slanted down through a crack between a plank wall and the plywood roof of the shack. In it tiny dust particles danced in perfect choreographed synchronicity, humming the tune to “The Lion Sleeps Tonight.” He’d always liked that song. He moved the photo into the beam. Angel’s smiling face both warmed and wrecked him. He remembered the day he’d taken it—her twenty-fifth birthday. They’d driven to Flagstaff and spent the night, then got up early to see the Grand Canyon, one of Angel’s bucket list wishes. The photo caught her in candid motion as she turned toward him, a second or two after her first glimpse over the canyon rim. Pure Angel. Pure joy. Pure perfection. Tears breached his lids and caught in his beard.

“Stupid snake. Lidless freak. What does he know anyway? You’re beautiful, Angel. The most beautiful thing I ever saw.”

Angel smiled.

He gave a ragged laugh then coughed into his sleeve, carefully away from the photo. “Hey, do you remember that time down in Nogales? That was some kind of something, wasn’t it? Remember that Tejano band? How we danced? Man, you loved to dance. I guess I did too . . . At least I used to ’cause it was with you.” He smiled and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. The dust particles slowed as they switched tunes—Freddy Fender’s Tex-Mex “Before the Next Teardrop Falls.” Gomez Gomez traced the edge of the photo with a finger. “Look at me, right? I’m a broken record. We just talked about Nogales yesterday. But, man . . . that Tejano band, they were something. You were something . . .”

Outside a single dove cooed, thickening the lonesome of the afternoon. Stinking doves made it hard to breathe sometimes.

Angel smiled.

“You knew how to die, didn’t you?”

The dove again.

“You are so beautiful, Angel. I couldn’t believe you chose me, you know? Crazy bull rider Gomez Gomez . . .” The dust particles stopped humming Freddy Fender and hung still and silent, maybe waiting for the dove. “Remember the nights? At our old place? Sometimes we’d just lie there and hold each other. I know you remember too. I hit the lottery with you, man, but better. A million times better. What’s more than a million? A gazillion? I wish . . .” He shook off tears and looked up at the sunbeam. The stupid tears made everything blur. “Anyway, that Tejano band, right?” The particles hummed again, low and soulful, a tune Gomez Gomez didn’t recognize. “I hear everything now, Angel, did you know that? No kidding, everything. I hear the snakes—they never shut up. I hear the river laughing at me. I hear the sun . . . scraping across the sky like sand on a flat rock. Then, when it goes down it hisses like hot metal in water. And after it’s gone the stars start singing. I hear it all. The world is so stinking loud.” He looked at the photo. “But not *you*, Angel. I never hear you. The only thing I want to hear, but I never hear you. No matter how much I want, how much I hope, how much I drink . . . I never hear you. Talk to me, Angel. Please talk to me.”

The particles hung. The dove cooed. Then just the wind in the trees and the distant scrape of sand across flat rock.

And Angel smiling, fresh from the canyon.

Gomez Gomez stuck the photo back in the wallet, dropped to his knees, and shoved it deep under the mattress. Then, clutching the Folgers can of ashes to his chest, he curled up in his own filth and let himself weep.

CHAPTER FOUR

HONEY HICKS'S SLIM BODY ACHED hair to toenails. The tray piled with taco specials balanced on her right arm weighed roughly the same as her Aunt Holly—a considerable amount even after the free Weight Watchers trial promo. The coffeepot in her left hand didn't feel much lighter. On top of it all, no matter where she went in the Shorty's Café dining room, Matthias Galt's eyes never failed to find her.

Although, come to think of it, Matthias's attention might not be a bad thing. The jury was still out on that one.

At a window table she delivered the taco plates, filled a couple of coffee mugs, and offered the ready smile and usual pleasantries that came naturally to her. Delivery accomplished, she navigated back through the tables and around the counter toward the swinging door that led to the peaceful refuge of the kitchen. Matthias started to say something as she passed, but she pretended not to hear. Better not to give the guy the wrong idea.

Katie Morales, Jake's aunt and most recent in a long line of Shorty's Café matriarchs, hovered over the wide stainless steel cooktop. "So you talk to him?" Her Mexican accent thick.

"Talk to who?" Honey said.

"Don't give me *who*. Matthias Galt, that's who. Would it kill you to be nice to him? Maybe go out with him once?"

"I *am* nice to him."

"So go out with him."

“There’s a big difference between being nice and going out. Maybe he’s not my type.”

“Maybe he’s not your type? Nice. Makes good conversation, good job? And he’s crazy about you, obviously. What’s the matter with you? You like being lonely? He’s been asking you out ever since he got to town. What’s that, six months now? And he’s handsome! I’m about to go out with him myself.”

“I think Lou would have something to say about that.”

“What the ball and chain doesn’t know won’t kill him.”

“Dating customers is categorically frowned upon in the employee handbook.”

“We don’t have an employee handbook.”

“Well, we should. Hey, I serve. I smile. I make small talk. What more do you want?”

Katie tucked a bottle-black curl behind her ear then dabbed her forehead with a kitchen towel. “I want you to not be lonely. I want you to be happy.”

“I’m happy enough.”

Katie snorted. “Enough doesn’t count, *mija*.”

Honey had to smile when her boss called her “daughter.” Being everyone’s mother was Katie’s way.

“Let me ask you—what are you doing here anyway?” Katie said.

“Um, I think I’m picking up a carne asada burrito plate for Charles Faulks.”

“Exactly my point. Here you are working as a waitress. You have a college degree. You should be doing more.”

“I have an associate’s degree. From Paradise Community College. Not ASU . . . or Harvard. It hardly even counts.”

“A whatever degree. It’s still a degree. You started a career. Traveled.”

“I did social work in Honduras. I don’t think that counts as a career either.”

“And almost got married to that doctor down there. Marrying a doctor definitely counts as a career where I come from.”

“I grew up three doors down from you. And almost got married

isn't exactly a high point on a job application. What are you saying? You don't want me here?"

"Don't be dense. I love you here."

"Then what?"

Katie tapped her acrylic nails on a stove knob and flipped the tortilla. "I don't know, mija. Put down some roots. Live. Realize your potential."

"Now you sound like a self-help book."

"That's because you could use some self-help."

"I think my roots are growing fine. I got a cat. Did I tell you? How about that for roots?"

"You got a cat?"

"A big orange one."

"What's this cat's name?"

"Are you saying you don't believe I got a cat?"

"I'm saying what's his name?"

Honey paused. "His name is Charles Faulks."

"Charles Faulks as in the Charles Faulks you just waited on?"

"So? I like Charles Faulks. If I want to name my cat after him it's my business. Besides, it's a common enough name."

Katie shook her head. "You don't have a cat."

"You can't prove I don't have a cat."

"You don't have a cat, mija."

"Well, I'm getting a cat. At least I'm probably getting a cat."

"Matthias Galt is a nice boy. Solid. Plus he's good-looking. Go out with him."

"I thought we were talking about cats."

"Which is exactly your problem. You need to stop talking about cats."

"Matthias is too good-looking. It's suspicious. The guy probably drowns cats. Or hates old people. And what's with the New York accent? Is he in the Mafia?"

"Call me crazy, but it might have something to do with the fact he's from New York."

“And why is a guy from New York, a guy like that, in Paradise, Arizona? I bet he’s in witness protection or something shady.”

“Because witness protection people usually become police chiefs. He’s a nice boy,” Katie repeated.

“One thing I can say, he’s a man, not a boy. Maybe he’s too old for me.”

Katie flipped the tortilla again. “At least you noticed he’s a man. He’s thirty-nine and you’re thirty. That’s not too old for you.”

“How do you know how old he is?”

“I asked him. You sure weren’t gonna do it.”

“Thirty-nine . . . Well, he’s too young for you.”

“Debatable. True love knows no age.”

“I can’t believe you asked him how old he is.”

“I like to know things, okay?” She tossed the tortilla on the counter and spooned strips of grilled steak, shredded lettuce, sour cream, red salsa, and guacamole onto it. With pursed lips she rolled a fat, tight burrito, fingers moving with the ease of years of repetition. “He’s a man and you’re a woman. Perfect match. End of story. Or are you thinking of becoming a nun like my idiot nephew?”

Honey grabbed a hot pad and took a plate from the warming oven. She scooped generous portions of lettuce, rice, and refried beans onto it, sprinkling the beans with cheese then adding the burrito when Katie handed it to her. Sadness nudged at the mention of Jake, but she shook it off. That ship had long sailed. She’d even sort of gotten semi-used to seeing him on a regular basis again, priest garb and all.

“The whole Jake thing is complicated. Nuns are still women, by the way. And Jake’s a priest, not a nun. Don’t act like you don’t love him either. You spoil the guy rotten.”

Katie shrugged. “Priests, nuns, what’s the difference? Same depressing black clothes and same love life—zero. Sure, I love the idiot, but that doesn’t make him less of an idiot. He could have had you, right? But he let you run off to some third-world backwater and almost get married to someone else.”

“He didn’t let me go. He went to seminary, remember? And the doctor came later. Long after Jake.”

“Same difference. Would you have left if he didn’t go to seminary?”

“He did go to seminary. Doesn’t matter now, it’s all in the past. The point is I like being a waitress. And I like being one at Shorty’s.”

“You sure you don’t like it here ’cause you get to see Jake practically every day? You need to move on, girl. It’s pathetic.”

Jake . . . Everything always came around to Jake.

“I have moved on. Jake—Father Jake—didn’t leave me much choice, did he? Could we please talk about Charles Faulks the cat again?”

“No cats, we’re talking about Matthias Galt.”

“I’m telling you, a guy like that won’t like Charles Faulks the cat.”

“You’re hopeless. Quit gabbing and get out there. Get busy or you’re fired.”

“You can’t fire me now. I have Charles Faulks the cat to support.”

“Watch me.”

Honey rolled her eyes as she slid the plate onto her tray and headed for the dining room. “You couldn’t live without me,” she said over her shoulder.

“Don’t bet on it.”

Matthias sat on a stool at the counter working on his four-hundredth cup of coffee, give or take a few. He smiled at her again as she passed. The guy was nice to look at, Katie was right about that. Tan, sun-lined face, gray eyes, a few days’ worth of stubble on his chin. His sandy-brown hair reminded her of the desert, and the badge pinned to his khaki uniform shirt gave him an official air—solid and real. The shirt tucked into Wrangler jeans . . . all in all the guy looked like he belonged on the cover of one of Katie’s ridiculous romance novels. The Western kind, where the beautiful 1890s rancher’s daughter with windblown movie-star hair is falling into the arms of the misunderstood outlaw with a heart of gold, his shirt half torn off and a bandage on his arm.

Yeah, he was nice to look at.

Honey slid the carne asada burrito plate in front of Charles Faulks—the man, not the cat—a skinny tow truck driver in greasy coveralls with his name stitched over the right breast pocket in blue thread.

A Paradise fixture, Charles Faulks liked to talk, especially if talking involved correcting someone. His name was one of his favorite points of contention. Don't dare call him Charlie or Chuck. Only Charles Faulks, first and last, would do.

"One carne asada burrito plate, Charles Faulks. More Coke?"

"Pepsi."

"Excuse me?"

"It's Pepsi, not Coke."

"Right, well, Coke in the generic sense."

"You can't say Coke in a generic sense. Coke is distributed by The Coca-Cola Company. It's very specific. Pepsi is distributed by Pepsi-Co. I'm struggling to see why you can't understand the difference."

"How about if I just call it soda? That work?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Okay . . ."

"And I'm done arguing the point. Arguing makes me nervous. You know that."

Honey gave a decisive nod knowing full well how much Charles Faulks loved to argue. "Me too. I think it's a good idea we just drop the whole thing. I'll consider it a lesson learned."

"Good. Yes, by the way."

"Yes what?"

"The answer to your question. Yes, I would like more Pepsi."

Honey smiled. "Out of Pepsi, only have Coke today."

"Was that a joke?"

Honey showed a narrow gap between her thumb and finger. "Sorry. A very tiny one."

"Oh, okay. Very nice, very funny. I like jokes."

"Me too. I'll get you that Pepsi."

"Okay . . . Yes, that was very funny." He muttered something about Pepsi under his breath as she walked away.

Once Charles Faulks was properly re-Pepsied, she headed around the counter and picked up the coffeepot to make the rounds. Shorty's jangled with conversation, laughter, and rattling silverware. Honey let

her body navigate the cluttered waters of the dining room on autopilot. On the radio behind the counter, Chris Stapleton explained the difference between “Whiskey and You” in his earthy baritone. Sun poured in through the big windows facing the town square.

Honey loved this place. Shorty’s Restaurant and Café—a Paradise staple for more than a hundred years. Even listed as a landmark by the National Register of Historic Places. Though his moniker graced the sign out front, Shorty, whoever he’d been, languished in the dim and misty recesses of yesteryear. As far as the locals were concerned or could remember, the place had always belonged to some generation of the Morales family—Katie and her husband, Lou, for the last two decades. The vintage clock above the pie cabinet sported a rotund, hand-painted Mexican man with a sombrero and drooping mustache. His disjointed arms and hands circumnavigated the numbers pointing out the time. At the moment Mario, as he was affectionately referred to by the staff, indicated with somber gravity that Honey’s shift would be over in twenty minutes. She offered him a silent *gracias* on behalf of her throbbing feet.

She paused in front of Matthias Galt’s empty cup and raised one eyebrow in an unspoken question.

“Yes, please,” he said.

“You really want more?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Maybe. Columbia called. They’re running low and asked if you could cut back.”

Matthias smiled then nodded toward the tow truck driver across the room. “How’s old Charlie?”

“You mean Charles Faulks?” Honey said the name with her best low-whispered Charles Faulks impersonation. “I don’t get it. He eats the same carne asada burrito plate at least five days a week, drinks a gallon of Pepsi—not Coke, by the way—and he’s still skinny as a dry bean-pole. How does that work?”

“Must be genetic. Lucky. How about tonight?”

“How about tonight what?”

“You and me. Us. We go to Spur’s, have a nice meal. Talk. You know, things people do when they’re dating. Plan our life. Start our future.”

Honey filled his cup. “So we’re dating now?”

“I figure we spend enough time together. Might as well make it official.”

“By time together you mean you sitting here drinking coffee while I run burritos over to Charles Faulks?”

Matthias blew on his coffee then sipped. “I guess that’s one way to look at it.”

“That’s the only way to look at it. Do you ever give up?”

He scratched the back of his head and grinned. “Not to my recent recollection.”

She looked him in the eye but didn’t smile. “Can I ask you a question? Why do you wear Wranglers if you’re from New York?”

“I like to fit in with the locals. What can I say?”

“Honestly, did you always secretly dream of being a cowboy or something? Read Zane Grey under your covers with a flashlight at night in your Manhattan apartment?”

“I’m from the Bronx. And no way, I hate big animals. Horses, cows, elephants, doesn’t matter. Cowboys got a screw loose.”

“I wouldn’t say that too loud in here.”

Matthias glanced around. “You’re probably right about that. So what do you say? Come out to dinner with me.”

“Do you like cats?”

“Absolutely not. I hate cats.”

“I knew it. Not even kittens?”

“Maybe kittens, if they’re other people’s kittens. Tonight?”

She paused. “I’ll think about it.”

His face broke into a Dentyne commercial. “Really? What time should I pick you up?”

“I didn’t say yes. I said I’d think about it.”

“But that’s good, right? It’s more than you ever said before.”

“Don’t push it.” She moved down the counter, turning her back to him.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

The bell over the front door jangled.

And Jake walked in . . .

Jake with Early Pines on his heels, a sight familiar to Honey since grade school. Jake's gaze swept the room then landed on her, holding warmth and distance at the same time. For a second she thought he'd come over to her, but instead they headed for the counter and took stools next to Matthias.

Matthias said something to Early and Early shook his head.

Jake . . . More than a year now since she had come back from Honduras—more than five since they dated—and the guy still stirred something inside her.

She'd been around priests her whole life and for some reason never really thought of them as actual men. More like another species altogether, somber, mysterious aliens. But Jake was, well . . . *Jake*. Robe and collar, sure, but Jake. Tall. His dark hair curling at the ends. Those wide-set eyes, a blend of serious and kind.

Had it really been that many years since they'd been together? She'd traveled, met another man, even come close to getting married. But when she saw Jake, it all seemed like yesterday. She'd been approached by plenty of men since her return—with waitressing, it went with the territory—and she'd been tempted to say yes a time or two. But in the end . . . *Ugh—in the end nobody's Jake.*

Jake, quiet and serious. How those dark eyes of his looked right into you. How such hard hands could be so gentle. How sometimes he'd break his stoic shell and say something funny when you least expected it. And best of all, always knowing he was a man who would have your back, no matter what came, no matter how hard life bucked. *What happened, Jake?*

Early grinned as she approached. "Hey, Honey, want to marry me and have nine kids since Jake's a priest now?"

Same old Early, smile so contagious Honey couldn't help returning it. "You've been asking me that since I was in second grade. Come to think of it, you asked me when you were here an hour ago. The answer's still the same—a very solid maybe. How about some coffee instead?"

“Just remember, I was asking back when the pope here didn’t even know you were alive.” He held his arms out wide. “Look what you missed, lady. I’m pretty. Some lucky woman is gonna snatch me up any minute. You better come to your senses before it’s too late.”

“Uh-huh. You want coffee or not?”

“Always.”

Honey reached under the counter and pulled out a couple of ceramic mugs. She slid one in front of Early and poured. “If you tell me to stir it with my finger to make it sweeter, I swear I’ll punch you in the neck.”

“You already said it for me,” Early said.

“How about you, Jake? You want coffee?”

Jake nodded. “I could use some. How’re you doing, Honey?”

Honey tried to read his face but couldn’t. She poured for him, shaking her head. “Great. Everything’s perfect. All good.”

“How’s your grandma?”

She put on her neutral, talking-to-Jake face. “Still good. You ask me that every time you come in. You need some new material, buddy.”

The corner of his mouth rose a fraction. “I’ll work on it.”

Maybe it was the way he said her name. Maybe the fresh fingerprints of her kitchen conversation with Katie. Or some star she’d never heard of aligned with some other star as it slid through the cosmic shadows . . . Or maybe it was just the new lines she saw around his eyes. The man who wore his duty, honor, and commitment like a lead X-ray apron and always would. He was Jake. No, Father Jake, like it or not. And Katie was right—Honey needed to let go.

And Matthias wasn’t a bad guy . . .

In fact, he was a pretty good guy. He was nice . . . solid. And all that coffee he’d poured down himself just to be near her . . . *At least give the guy a chance. One date never hurt anybody, right?*

Matthias’s coffee cup still sat three-quarters full. Honey put her pot down next to it with a thump. “Let me ask you something. What kind of person doesn’t like cats?”

“What?” Matthias said.

“Cats. Did I stutter?”

“No.”

“Do you have a hearing problem?”

“Not as of my last physical.”

“Then answer the question.”

He scratched his chin. “Lots of kinds?”

“Do you like old people?”

“They’re passable, unless they have cats.”

“Okay then. Seven o’clock,” she said.

All three of the men looked at her.

“What?” Matthias said.

“For our date. Pick me up at seven. How hard is that to understand? Don’t you solve crimes for a living? Lord, help this town.” She turned and headed for the kitchen.