

**THE SOUND
THE SUN
MAKES**

BUCK STORM



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The Sound the Sun Makes

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CHAPTER ONE

*May 25—Valle Del Viento,
just outside of Paradise, Arizona*

SOME PEOPLE SAY THE DESERT makes a person feel small. But it never had that effect on Early Pines.

Out here, alone in the empty, he always felt bigger than he did in town. Out here, where he could see all the way across the valley to the Chiricahua mountain range, his thoughts bounced off the sky so hard they rattled his skin. And this morning, sipping black coffee on the back patio of his little adobe, they echoed back with particular intensity.

He did his best to ignore them for a while. Or maybe longer than a while, because when he sipped his coffee again it was cold. He set the cup on the ground next to his chair. He could, he told his body, go inside for a refill, but his legs disagreed so he kept sitting. And kept bouncing thoughts.

He flexed his fingers and winced. The thing most people don't know about punching somebody: it hurts your hand about as much as it hurts the guy's face. A week and Early's knuckles were still swollen.

A week . . .

He needed to get up and do something.

Anything.

But he didn't.

It wasn't like him. Or it hadn't been. But these days, mornings on the patio tended to last longer than they used to.

A flicker of movement out in the sage. The coyote was back. The thing came around so often Early ought to give him a name. It slunk a few steps closer and squatted on its haunches. Yellow, serious eyes.

"What?" Early said.

The animal's tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth.

"One time, amigo. I fed you one time. It's over between us, all right? You know what they say, it's not me, it's you. Beat it."

The coyote didn't beat it.

Early sighed. "Fine, but don't get too comfortable."

The coyote lowered onto his belly and blinked.

Past the coyote, far out across the desert, a dust devil danced in the bright shimmer. No roads out that direction. Not much of anything besides a handful of forgotten mines and dehydrated dreams.

Early lifted his cup to the coyote. "Here's to a little peace and quiet, huh? God's country."

The creature rose, backed up a few feet, then sat down again and resumed his one-sided staring contest.

Early's place sat on a rise about five miles outside of Paradise, Arizona, a little backwater town tucked into the foothills of the southeastern corner of the state. Most people who chose to live in Paradise either stuck close to city limits or had homes farther up in the mountains where pine trees and cooler summers were the order of the day. Not Early. He was a creature of the flat. He'd bought the ancient adobe some years ago, back in his rodeo days, from a distant Navajo cousin for practically nothing. Early wasn't even a quarter Native himself, but even a little *Diné* blood was plenty to supply a few cousins in this country.

He'd spent the better part of a year hunting and hauling flagstone for the back patio he sat on now. Built it western facing for the sunsets though he'd found he enjoyed watching the first fingers of the rising sun touch the valley just as much, and maybe even more. At

the moment, those sun fingers were hours gone and Old Man Sol had begun his work in earnest. Early sighed, rose, unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, tossed his coffee dregs into a stand of sage, and headed in for a refill, letting the screen door bang shut behind him.

He was rinsing the cup in the sink, having opted for a Mexican Coke instead because of the heat, when he heard tires popping gravel. Sound traveled out here. It'd be at least a few minutes before the truck arrived. He didn't go to the front of the house to look. Didn't need to. Only Jake would make the trip out here now. Everyone else knew Early was in a mood. They'd steer clear. But not Jake. Never Jake. Early walked back out onto the patio and sat, long legs stretched out, ankles crossed. He took a pull from the Coke bottle. The coyote was gone.

More gravel popping. Out front now. A truck door slammed and the front door of the house banged open without a knock. Boot heels scuffed. A cabinet creaked. Jake emerged through the back door, steaming coffee cup in hand.

"Help yourself," Early said.

Jake sipped, his eyes pulling in the distance. He didn't say anything, but that was Jake.

"If I told you I wanted to be alone, would you leave?" Early said.

Jake sipped again.

Early sighed. "Well, don't just stand there all Jake on me. You might as well sit."

Jake dragged a wooden chair over with his boot and lowered himself onto it. He took off his old cowboy hat—same one he'd had since their rodeo days—and set it upside down on the floor next to him. Tilting back, he rested his dark, sweat-matted hair against the mud brick. The dull thrum of a distant plane challenged the breeze. Far out above the mountains, sunlight glinted off metal and a gleaming vapor trail cut a horizontal slash in the blue-blanket sky.

"How you doing, Early?"

"I'm just fine, Jake. How are you?"

"I'm serious."

"I know you are. You're always serious."

"Haven't seen you in town."

"Me and the coyotes have a lot to discuss. So you can understand I've been busy."

"That what you're doing out here, talking to the wildlife?"

"Better than talking to myself."

"I'm not sure that's even a little true."

The vapor trail slowly dissipated to wispy white threads. Early tried to pick the plane out but couldn't now. He uncrossed his boots, then crossed them again. "Matthias send you out?"

"Nope."

"He should have. Shoulda sent you to tell me to come back to work."

"Nope."

"Why nope?"

"He's only doing his job. He's all right. You know that."

"A police chief is supposed to have his detective's back, man. Not put them on leave for something they had to do."

"That what you're telling the coyotes?"

"They agree with me. Lee had it coming."

"As far as I can see, all Lee did was not cross over to the other side of the street when he saw you."

"Exactly what I mean, he had it coming."

"Look, I'm not going to tell you how long you should carry your Lee baggage around, but you can't just knock a guy out on the sidewalk and blame your boss for putting you on the shelf. You know that, you're not stupid."

"It's been a week, man. How long will this go on?"

"Till they decide it's done, I guess."

"Lee knew what would happen if he didn't avoid me."

"Did he? You and Lee have existed in the same town for years. You never hit him before."

Early sipped and shrugged. "I was in a bad mood."

"You put the man in the hospital, Early."

"He got out, didn't he? He's got a head like a brick. Trust me, I had

to ice my hand for days. And I'd hit him again. I'm not gonna apologize for hitting a wife beater."

"How many years has it been?"

"Not enough by a long shot."

"All right. But the council thinks he might sue the city, and you, so you can see Matthias's position. He has to wait and see."

"You saying you wouldn't have done the same if you were me? Never mind, don't answer that. Saint Jake would've greeted the guy with a holy kiss."

"Take it out on me, fine. But you need to get a little perspective here, amigo. This isn't going away no matter how long you hide out here with the coyotes."

"I'm not hiding."

"That's exactly what you're doing."

"C'mon, Jake."

Jake looked out toward the Chiricahuas. "You wear a badge, Early. I didn't personally hear the oath you took to do that, but I imagine the words 'protect and serve' were in there somewhere. That includes Lee."

Early said nothing.

"Plus, I'm not sure it's even about Lee."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That bad mood you mentioned? Since Gomez Gomez died you've been walking way out on the edge. And I know you, the edge is the last place you need to be."

"I'm fine."

"Tell that to Lee."

Another glint. Another vapor trail on the horizon. A bird flitted in the sage.

Early let his head fall back and hit the wall with a gentle thump. "I don't know, man, maybe you're right about the Gomez Gomez thing."

"It's been known to happen from time to time."

"But mandatory leave? Matthias should—"

"Mathias should've done exactly what he did. Stop lying to yourself."

Early picked at the label on his Coke bottle with his thumbnail. “People saying I was drinking when I hit him?”

“Since when do you care what people think?”

“Not often. But the drinking thing—it’s in the past. Kinda bothers me people might think it wasn’t.”

“You’re three years sober. Everybody knows that.”

“Three years and forty-one days.”

“And I’m proud of you. But sitting out here with nothing but sky and coyotes would test anyone’s resolve.”

“Are you my sponsor now?”

Jake half smiled. “I’ve been your sponsor since kindergarten.”

Early set his empty bottle down.

Jake stood. “I’m gonna get some more coffee. Get you another Coke?”

“Nah. I’m good.”

The screen door creaked and banged. After a minute Jake came back out and took his chair again.

Early scuffed his boot against the flagstone. “You ever think about him?”

“Lee?”

“Gomez Gomez.”

“All the time. I miss him as much as you do.”

“Three of us rodeoing all over the place all those years. It’s weird, him being gone. Like there’s a hole in the world where he used to be. Like a star’s missing or something.”

“That’s exactly right. I feel it too.”

“Everybody says he’s with Angel now. Like that’s supposed to make it all good.”

“He loved his wife. With her is the only place he’d ever be happy. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make me feel better thinking about it.”

“He’s dead, man. How’s there any comfort in that?”

Jake didn’t answer and they sat in silence for a few minutes, the way friends who’ve seen miles together sometimes do.

“Let me ask you something,” Early said. “You remember when Gomez Gomez said he could hear the sun scraping across the sky?”

“I remember.”

“Why do you think that was?”

“I don’t know, the liquor tore him up pretty bad those last years.”

“Yeah, but he was always a little off. Beat of a different drum and all that.”

“You know what they say—you’ve got to be either crazy-brave or crazy-crazy to ride bulls.”

“He was a whole bunch of both.”

“Probably. Yeah.”

“Thing is . . .”

“The thing is what?”

“Man, Jake . . .”

“What?”

“I’m not drinking.”

“We’ve established that.”

“I’m starting to hear it too. The sun scraping. I swear some days it sounds like somebody’s dragging a ten-ton bag of gravel. So loud it hurts my ears. I think I’m losing it like Gomez Gomez.”

Jake studied him. “You hear the sun?”

“It never stops, man. It’s crazy, I know. But all this extra time with nothing to do. All this . . . space. Mandatory leave? For hitting stinking Lee? What am I supposed to do with myself?”

Jake stood. “Not sit out here listening to the sun and talking to coyotes, I know that much.”

Early leaned forward, elbow on knee, rubbed his temples with thumb and forefinger. “You got a better idea? Because I’m seriously losing it.”

“Yup. I didn’t come out here to listen to you whine. Go pack a bag.”

“Why?”

“Why does a person usually pack? We’re going on a trip.”

“What trip?”

“A rodeo trip. Quit asking questions and let’s go.”

“What about Honey?”

“She’s visiting that hypochondriac aunt of hers in Phoenix. Won’t

be back for a few days at least. The house is too quiet. So you'd be doing me a favor if you'd hoist your long, lazy carcass out of that chair and pack your things."

Early didn't move. "This a rescue mission for me or for you?"

Jake lifted a shoulder. "Let's call it combined necessity."

"For me then."

"If the boot fits."

"What rodeo? Tucson was in February."

"Agua Prieta."

Early couldn't help barking a laugh. "You want to go down to Old Mexico? You remember last time we were in Agua Prieta? I spent a night in jail, amigo."

"That night tequila was your amigo, not me. And now you got three years and forty-one days in your pocket. You're a changed man."

"Yeah, but Old Mexico?"

"Not to be confused with New Mexico. It's a good rodeo."

"It was good for you, if I remember right. You won some money there. More than once."

Jake put his hat on. "Got lucky. Drew good horses."

"All I won was a busted face, I think."

"Bulldogging'll do that to a guy."

"*Life* will do that. Tequila too, I guess."

"If you're not careful."

Early finally stood and stretched. "All right, Jake Morales, sponsor and travel agent. Agua Prieta. But we're taking my truck."

CHAPTER TWO

THEY DROVE SOUTH.

Because south has always been the way for men on the run. Whether it be from the law, too-quiet-wifeless houses, or mandatory leaves and overly noisy suns. Early pushed his battered 1972 Chevy pickup as fast as the gravel road would let him, leaving a half-mile-long dust trail to mark their passing. They could have cut west and caught the highway—there was actually a pretty good road down to Agua Prieta—but Early had never been the highway kind. At least not when he could help it. Which was why he'd wanted to drive in the first place.

Jake leaned back, pulled his hat down over his eyes. "You're sure you know where we're going?"

"I got an internal GPS."

"What is it with you and back roads?"

"Life happens on back roads, brother."

"Uh-huh. You know, if I'd known you were going to wear that hat, I wouldn't have brought you."

"I always wear this hat."

"It's a rodeo."

"So?" Early leaned over and glanced at himself in the driver's side mirror. His trucker hat—white front, red bill—said *Kiss Me, I'm Baptist*. He pulled the brim low against the wind coming through the open window. True, he was less than a quarter Navajo but, with his sun-weathered face, he looked more. Dark hair to his shoulders. His

nose angled a bit to the left. A fine scar tracing up from the edge of his mouth almost to his eye courtesy of a stubborn steer and a wire fence. The broken nose, close as he could figure, he'd gotten in a parking lot fight behind an Amarillo bar, though his memory of the event was more than a little foggy. "What's wrong with my hat?"

"Where do you want me to start? You're not a Baptist, for one."

"The Baptists gave it to me so I'm at least Baptist approved."

"Was that before or after you gave them your speech about religion being the opiate of the masses?"

"I wanted the hat, man. It makes me laugh. I wouldn't mess that up with a speech. But even you have to admit the communion wine's laced with something a little heavier these days, pontiff."

"Baptists use grape juice."

"That's because Baptists tend to keep their sinning polite and mostly unnamed. They only think white-dove thoughts. Unless they're playing softball, then they get all hard-core. Which is another reason I kinda like the hat."

Jake hung an arm out the window. "I'm just saying you could've scrounged up something else."

"I like to stand out."

"You're six five without your boots on and you're made of wood and leather. Trust me, you don't need a hat to stand out."

Early relaxed in his seat and breathed in the desert. He searched his brain for a white-dove thought or two, but those power lines were vacant. *At least I'm moving.* It was a step in the right direction.

Jake dozed. Or at least he might've dozed, Early couldn't be sure. Jake could be quiet like that, especially on road trips. They'd seen a lot of miles, the two of them. The three of them when you included Gomez Gomez. And it felt good to be seeing a few more. The sun climbed and the temperature with it. Not even close to noon and already a shade over a hundred degrees. Early didn't mind. Heat kept the desert empty. And a desert should be empty. A private place for hawks and lizards and kangaroo rats and him.

A crossroads loomed and he backed his foot off the gas. The inter-

secting road was paved. On the corner, a ramshackle building with a rusty metal sign proclaimed the Chiricahua Trading Post occupied and open. Early rolled to a stop on the gravel in front of the shop and killed the engine.

Jake sat up, tilted his hat back, and looked around. "You lost?"

"Never lost. I told you."

"Where are we?"

"Smack-dab in the middle of where we are. I'm gonna get something to drink. Rodeo doesn't start till tomorrow. You in a hurry?"

Jake opened the passenger door and rolled out. "Nope."

Rambling adobe and corrugated metal. A low wooden porch fronted the place. Above the entry, a semi-neatly painted *yah ta hey* offered a canary-yellow traditional Navajo greeting. Early stomped the dust off his boots and stepped inside, Jake behind him. Low drum and flute music drifted. Racks of T-shirts. A display of brightly colored wool blankets, pottery, and a long jewelry case. An acne-scarred but pretty teen sitting behind a checkout counter appeared to be the sole occupant. She tore her eyes from her iPhone long enough to give them an I-wish-I-were-anywhere-but-here smile. "Yah ta hey. Hello. Greetings. Aloha. *Privet*."

"What's *privet*?" Early said.

"Hello in Russian, I think."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. You impressed?"

"Yeah, actually."

She shrugged and went back to her phone.

A coyote stared at him from the front of a black T-shirt. He pointed at it. "I got one looks just like that who hangs around my place. Fed him once and now he won't go away."

Her dark eyes shifted up from her screen without moving her head. "You shouldn't feed him. Everyone knows Coyote's a trickster. It's a bad omen to have him around."

"You believe in that stuff?"

"I don't know. I got an uncle who used to tell us stories about

skinwalkers and stuff. How they can turn themselves into animals. Look like something they're not. Always gave me nightmares. Still does sometimes. Coyote's the same way. If it were me, I wouldn't feed him, but whatever, do what you want." Eyes back to the phone, subject apparently closed.

Early fingered the T-shirt, flicked the coyote on the nose. "I already got trouble, so get in line, pal."

At the cold-drink case in the back of the store he pulled a couple water bottles from a cooler, tossed one to Jake, and opened another. Jake headed back outside, but the swamp-cooled air felt good so Early lingered, stretching his legs. He walked the aisles, his boots loud on the plank floor. He checked out some pottery and blankets, then looked out through the fly-specked window. Unhindered by civilization, the desert rolled off to the horizon. Distant mountains, red and jagged, jutted up against the endless sky. You could always see mountains in the desert distance. Years ago, and several times since, he had rodeoed through the Midwest with its flat plains and unbroken space. He had always found the place unnerving. Mountainless, and without stick or stump to slow the tumbleweeds and dust-bowl ghosts. No, thanks. A man needed something out there to corral his soul.

A cobweb danced in the fan breeze. Out in the parking lot, Jake leaned against the hood of the truck and wiped his water bottle across his forehead. Past him, a decrepit tractor pulling a trailer piled with hay bales popped and jerked as it made slow progress along the side of the road. Early walked back to the counter where the girl gave one-handed change without looking up.

"See ya around," he said.

"Adios. Goodbye. Sayonara. *Proshchay*. Have a nice day."

"You oughta work for the United Nations. Your talents are wasted here."

"True story."

A chime sounded from somewhere in the back as he pulled open the door.

"Hey," the girl said as he was stepping out.

He turned. "Yeah?"

"Watch those coyotes, huh?"

"Will do."

Back out in the heat, he climbed in the truck and turned the engine over.

"Making friends in there?" Jake said.

"Yup. She told me Coyote was gonna eat me."

"It'd be a pretty desperate coyote."

"Let's go to a rodeo."

Jake leaned back and pulled his hat down. "I never argue with Baptists. Drive on, amigo, Old Mexico's calling."

They pulled out and turned right. The road was paved now. The sun high and bright, heat waves dancing on the horizon. Windows up, the old air conditioner complained but blew coolish air. They'd gone a good forty miles when the truck lurched slightly right and a rhythmic thump sounded.

Jake sat up. "Flat tire? Are you kidding?"

"Sounds like it." Early pulled the truck off the road and both of them got out. Sure enough, the driver's side rear rested on the rim. Early took off his hat and wiped his brow. "It's gotta be a hundred and ten. This'll be fun."

"You wanted to take your truck."

"Only because you wanted to go to Old Mexico."

"Yeah, all right. Where's the spare?"

"Mounted under the bed. Get it and I'll grab the iron." Early dug behind the truck seat until he came up with the tire iron. Jake was squatting behind the truck as he rounded the back of the bed.

"Problem," Jake said.

Early stopped. "Don't say the spare's flat."

Jake stood. "All right. I won't say it."

CHAPTER THREE

EARLY LEANED AGAINST THE TAILGATE, arms crossed. Jake stood a dozen yards away in the middle of the road looking down at his phone.

The asphalt shimmered.

The sun scraped and laughed.

“Nothing?” Early called.

“Nothing.”

“Keep walking. If you don’t pick up a signal, you’ll at least hit Phoenix eventually.”

Jake started back, shaking his head. “A flat spare. How does that happen?”

Early shrugged. “Rock coulda bounced up. Coulda been anything.”

Jake slipped his phone into his jeans pocket. “You and your back roads. What now?”

Early pulled his duffel from the truck bed and slung the strap over his shoulder. “We start walking unless we want to spend the night out here. Which I don’t.”

Jake pulled his own bag out. “How far do you think One Horse is? Been a while since I’ve been through here.”

“Can’t be more than five or six miles. We can at least get to a phone.” He opened the driver’s side door and grabbed an old blanket-covered canteen from behind the seat.

A corner of Jake’s mouth lifted. “Early Pines, a man with extra water but no spare tire.”

“Somebody’ll come along. I doubt we’ll have to walk the whole way.”

Jake hitched his bag higher and glanced up at the sun. “Five miles.”

“Maybe not even that.”

“Let’s get to it then.”

A mile into the trek, Early was sweating hard. Two miles and his faded denim shirt had turned dark blue. They passed the canteen back and forth occasionally but spoke little, both too hot for their usual banter.

Early did the math in his head. What had it been, twenty-eight years now? Since they were five or six. Jake, quiet and serious even as a kid. Always old for his age. But the kind of guy who had your back no matter what came. Childhood had been wild and rough to say the least, most of the blame for that landing squarely on Early. As adults, they’d hit the various rodeo circuits. Jake, Early, and Gomez Gomez. Seen a lot of the country. Even New York City one time. Madison Square Garden. Jake had been a better-than-good saddle bronc rider. But even had he been average, mere participation in that particular event placed a cowboy among the rodeo elite. Gomez Gomez, thin, wiry, and Teflon tough, rode bulls. Early, mainly because he had the size for it, had bulldogged. A dainty little sport that involved dropping off a full-out running horse and wrestling a six-hundred-pound steer to the ground by its horns.

It had been a good time, even with a broken bone or three, until Jake had been in the car accident that had killed Angel, Gomez Gomez’s wife. It had all spiraled down then. Gomez Gomez retreating into a haze of alcohol, and Jake running—albeit temporarily—to the Catholic priesthood of all things, cowboy hat and all. He still ran the historical museum at the mission, when he wasn’t breaking the odd horse or two. That all was a long time ago now but it seemed like yesterday. Time was tricky like that. That season of years had eventually passed, but time still marched. Six months now since Gomez Gomez had followed Angel into the next life.

Everything changes. Early looked off toward the distant mountains. *Except the desert.* Maybe that’s why he liked it out here so much.

An hour and a half later, a handful of sun-faded buildings emerged from the heat waves. Another half mile and they found themselves in downtown One Horse. Early did a slow three-sixty, his boots scraping in the still afternoon. A gas station that looked like it hadn't seen paint since the fifties, a handful of crumbling adobes, and a sagging wooden tavern with a sign that said *Bob's Place*.

"Better than nothing," Jake said. "At least I see phone lines."

"A real cosmopolitan wonder." Early eyed the gas station. "I don't see a tow truck, though."

"Might as well ask." Jake headed for the open roll-up garage door on the other side of the pumps.

Inside, the place smelled like grease and dead socks and was, if possible, even hotter than the blistered and cracked asphalt outside.

"Hello?" Early said.

"Closed," came a muffled reply.

"Where are you?" Early said.

A hacking smoker's cough. "I said I'm closed. Go away."

"Your door's open," Early said.

"So? It's a free country last time I checked. Door's my business. Go away." Another cough.

The voice, it turned out, belonged to a couple of grease-soaked coverall legs sticking out from beneath a Ford Tempo sedan, sun-bleached to the point of being colorless.

Early knelt. "We got a pickup with a flat about five miles up the road. Can you help us out?"

A wrench banged, the legs twitched, and an impressive and inventive string of expletives flew. "Japanese junk! What part of *closed* are you not understanding, amigo? Beat it. I'm not gonna tell you again."

Early glanced up at Jake, who shrugged.

"I guess he's closed," Early said.

"Seems to be the case."

Early shook his head and took a greasy ankle in each hand.

"Hey!" the legs said.

Early pulled.

Wheels on the mechanic's dolly squeaked.

The body belonging to the legs, no surprise, turned out to be equally filthy. Frizzy gray hair ringed an otherwise bald head and melded with a week's worth of stubble on a fleshy, flushed face. Thick black-rimmed glasses doubled the size of blinking eyes. "What the—?"

"Look at that, you just opened," Early said. "Lucky us, right, Jake?"

"Does seems like good timing."

Early expected blustering and threats but the man surprised when he offered a slow grin. "You really just do that?"

"I told you, we have a flat," Early said.

The man struggled to his feet, grabbed an oily rag off the hood of the Tempo, and attempted to wipe his hands. "Piece-of-cat-feces car has me spitting nails. Says Ford on the grill but they made 'em in Japan. I keep telling her to buy something else. I'm a mechanic, not a magician, for crying out loud. What kind of truck you say?"

"Seventy-two Chevy."

The man pulled a pack of Marlboros from the pocket of his coveralls, shook out a cigarette, and tapped it on the hood of the Ford. He lit it with a Zippo, clacked the lighter closed with a flick of his wrist. "Standard tires? 75R15s? Or are you one of those bigger-the-better guys?"

"Just stock," Early said. "You got a tow truck? Or can you patch it out there?"

"Got a truck out back. I'll take care of it."

"How long will it take?"

"Couple hours."

Jake looked at his watch. "It's four now. So six? We could still make the border tonight."

The mechanic shook his head. "Not tonight. Tomorrow."

"You said a couple hours," Early said. "That makes it six o'clock."

"I said it would *take* a couple hours. That couple of hours will happen tomorrow morning when and if I decide to get out of bed. And I ain't an early riser, *comprende?*"

"No, I don't *comprende*," Early said. "We need the truck tonight."

The mechanic blew out a stream of smoke in Early's direction, then walked over to a sink and started scrubbing his hands and forearms. "Listen, pal, you're a giant, I get it. Super scary and all that. Yanked me out from underneath a car. Good for you. But the Diamondbacks are playing the Dodgers in about an hour. So you could beat me to a bloody mess right here and now and I promise you I'll rise from the dead and my butt will be parked over on one of Bob's comfy barstools with a cold beer in front of me come first pitch. I don't miss the D-backs ever. Not even for giants."

"What are we supposed to do until tomorrow, stand here?" Early said.

The cigarette bounced on the mechanic's bottom lip, somehow stayed on. "They got some rooms they rent out back of Bob's. They're cheap and clean. Go ask. Plus they're having a big wingding tonight. Don't happen very often. Got a band coming in and everything. Lotta people'll come out for it."

Early looked out the big roll-up door. "What people exactly? You and Bob?"

The mechanic blew dual streams of smoke through his nostrils and pointed, dipping his head a little. "Desert can be deceiving. There's people out there sure enough. Come a long way when something outta the ordinary's happening."

Early glanced at Jake. "What do you think?"

Jake shrugged. "Rodeo doesn't start till tomorrow. Rooms can't be as bad as El Paso that time."

"A gulag couldn't be as bad as El Paso that time. I'm still emotionally and physically scarred from that place. I guess we're watching baseball and hearing a band."

Jake took off his hat and mopped his brow. "Go Diamondbacks."

The mechanic's greasy red face grinned and the owl eyes blinked. He stubbed out his cig on the workbench. "Good deal. You guys'll buy the first round. Least you can do after yanking my legs."

CHAPTER FOUR

BOB'S PLACE SURPRISED. THE SUN-BEATEN, crumbling exterior ended at the door. Inside, it was clean and well-kept. A jukebox thumped Flaco Jiménez accordion. Only a few bikers in the place this time of day, and none at the bar where a big flat-screen television had the Diamondbacks pregame show on mute.

"You want to ask about rooms? I need to hit the restroom," Jake said.

"Try not to get lost."

"Might be tough without your internal GPS."

"All you can do is your best, pal. Everybody gets a trophy and a juice box anyway."

An old man so short only his head and shoulders showed leaned behind the bar reading a paperback. He didn't look up when Early took a stool.

"You Bob?" Early said.

"Nope," the man said.

"All right. You got a name?"

"Yup."

Early offered his best winning smile. "Is it private information?"

The old man glanced up, then went back to his book. "It ain't Bob."

Batwing doors behind the bar swung open and a woman entered. Dark eyes took in Early with a cool glance. Her black hair hung straight, halfway down her back. She was tall. And not just because

It-Ain't-Bob was so short. Close to six feet at least. She was also the most beautiful creature Early had ever seen.

"Hey," she said.

"How's it going?" Early replied.

"Jube taking care of you?"

Early pointed to the little man. "If the bookworm's Jube, then so far he's done a fantastic job of telling me his name's not Bob, but that's about it."

"Jube," she said.

"Yeah, I know," the little man said without looking up.

"He must be in a good part. He'll be right with you." She busied herself wiping and putting away beer glasses at the far end of the counter.

Jake appeared and took a stool. He glanced at the woman, then at Early, who was still staring at her. "You gonna live?"

"I'm having my doubts."

The woman approached, looked at the little bartender, nose still deep in his book, and shook her head. "I give up. What are you boys drinking?"

"A beer for me. Something Mexican if you have it," Jake said.

"We're forty miles from the border, something Mexican is about all we have." She pulled a bottle of Dos Equis from a cooler beneath the counter, cracked it open, and slid it in front of Jake. "Glass?"

"No, thanks."

"How about you?" She eyed Early's hat. "Or are you going to take up a stool and not drink because you're some kind of Baptist?"

"I'm not Baptist."

"That mean I don't have to kiss you either?"

Early grinned. "I might've just become a little Baptist."

She eyed him. Didn't smile. "You want something or not?"

"You have Mexican Coke?"

"Coke? You serious?"

"Serious as a Baptist on Sunday morning."

She filled a cup with ice, popped the top off a bottle, and poured. "You a straw guy?"

“Definitely not.”

“Nah, you don’t look like a straw guy. Okay, let me know if you need anything else.” Then she was gone, back through the batwing doors.

“You want to pick your jaw up off the bar now?” Jake said.

“Can I just say one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“That, without doubt, was definitely not Bob.”

“And you didn’t ask if they had rooms, did you?”

“I forgot.”

Jake sipped his beer. “Yeah, you forgot.”

A stool squeaked and the mechanic slid up next to them. Clean now. He’d even shaved. Gone were the greasy coveralls, replaced with faded Wranglers, old running shoes, and a khaki shirt with a sewn-on name tag over the pocket that said Ray.

“That your name? Ray?” Early said.

The man smiled. “All my life. At least once I could shake loose of Raymond. Ray’s a lot shorter and sweeter, like me.”

On the flat screen, two announcers discussed the finer points of baseball in silent animation.

“Hey, Jube, grab me a cold one, will ya?” Ray said.

“Grab it yourself.”

Ray rolled his eyes but slid off the stool and rounded the bar. He fished in the cooler and came up with a Dos Equis. He lifted a caterpillar eyebrow at Jake and held up a bottle. “Another?”

“Just started this one. Thanks, though.”

Ray eyed Early’s Coke, shrugged, then took a pull of his beer before coming out from behind the bar and climbing up on his stool again. “Jube, unmute the TV, will ya?”

The barman, eyes never shifting from the page, reached under the counter, came up with a remote, and slid it to Ray. “Wait till this song’s over. I like it.”

Ray mumbled something about lousy service and unmuted. He pressed the volume button until Bob Brenly’s sportscaster baritone

drowned out the Texas Tornados. Jube muttered his displeasure but put down his book long enough to walk over and turn off the jukebox.

Early kept an eye on the batwings but it wasn't until the second inning, Diamondbacks down by two and Ray cussing a blue streak, that the dark-haired woman returned, drying her hands on an apron. She stopped in front of Early and Jake. "So I hear you boys are marooned."

"News travels fast," Early said.

"Fast, slow—in One Horse it doesn't have far to go. I'm guessing you're needing a room?"

"Two if you have them." Early jerked a thumb toward Jake. "He snores."

"I have them. Only ones in town. We also have the only food in town, so I guess you'll be eating here too."

"A regular monopoly," Early said.

"Are you hungry now? Be better to eat sooner rather than later. Having a band tonight, so it'll get busy."

"Any time that's convenient," Jake said. "Early's always hungry."

The woman fixed her dark eyes on Early. "What kind of a name is Early?"

He searched deep for a reply that might impress but came up blank.

Jake rescued him. "The inaccurate kind. He's usually late."

Early took off his hat, ran his fingers through his hair, and put it back on again. "He exaggerates. I'm usually pretty close to on time."

"And always hungry?" she said.

"He doesn't exaggerate about that. I'm a growing Baptist."

"Uh-huh." The woman turned to the little bartender. "Jube, put a few burgers on. Better make it two for the big one."

The little man gave Jake and Early the stink eye, then put down his book and shuffled off through the batwings. Pots banged.

"I think your bartender got up on the wrong side of the bed," Early said.

"Sleeps on a cot shoved up against a wall in the back," Ray said.

"Only one side to get up on. He's all right once you get past the crust. He dotes on Calico here."

“I don’t know if I’d use the word *dote*,” the woman said. “I don’t think Jube dotes on anything but his books.”

“Calico?” Early said. “That’s your name?”

“Calico Foster,” the woman said.

Early grinned. “I had a very strong feeling you weren’t Bob.”

Her face hardened, little lines on her forehead. “Nope, I’m not Bob. I’m going to help Jube with the burgers.”

Early watched her go. “I thought not being Bob would be a compliment. Brother, that’s some thick ice to chip through.”

Ray’s focus remained on the game. “And it just got a lot thicker. You screwed up, buddy. Bob was her dad.”

“Was?”

“Died three months ago. Cancer. Calico runs the place now.”

“I’m an idiot,” Early said.

Jake set his beer down and patted his friend on the shoulder. “Since kindergarten, amigo. It’s a comfort to know some things don’t change.”

Early took a pull of his Coke and blew out a breath. “Idiot, idiot, idiot.”

“Yup, yup, yup,” Jake said.

Ray leaned back on his stool and gestured at the TV with both hands. “C’mon! Take him out already! We’re getting crushed here!”

One of the batwings pushed out and Calico stuck her head in. “Jube’ll have your burgers out in a few minutes. He’ll set you up with rooms. Just ask him if you need anything else.”

Early’d already formed an apology in his mind, but she was gone before he could speak.

Ray’s gripe must have transmitted through the screen. He picked up his beer as the game went to a commercial break for a pitching change.

They watched an inning or two without conversation. Jube pushed through the batwings, walking backward, a plate piled high with burgers and fries in each hand, and slid them in front of Jake and Early. He ignored their thanks and went back to his book.

The sixth inning or so, the front door banged and a slim, bearded man in jeans and a faded Harley Davidson T-shirt shuffled in lugging

a bass case. Another man followed with an amp in one hand and a guitar case in the other. His battered cowboy hat worked all right with the trucker mustache but wrestled with the shimmery Saturday Night Fever disco shirt and gold chains. After him, a biker pushing a cart loaded with more equipment.

“Gonna get kicking soon,” Ray said.

Early, food long gone and bored with the game, reversed on his stool, propped his elbows on the bar behind him, and watched the band set up. Cowboy John Travolta appeared to be the lead singer. A stick-thin, buzz-cut Native kid in a Lakers tank top thumped and tuned a drum kit. The bass player plugged into an amp and fiddled with the knobs. The bearded, neck-tatted biker picked up an electric guitar and worked through something sounding like a cross between Hendrix’s “Purple Haze” and “Feliz Navidad.”

“These guys actually make music?” Early said.

“I guess, but who cares? They’re here, so they’ll bring a crowd. Came over all the way from Wilcox,” Ray said.

“They got a name?”

“Lost Prophets was what the poster said. Which is fitting, seeing as you have to be pretty lost to wind up in One Horse.”

Ray had been right about the crowd: the bar was filling. Most of the tables and seats were already taken, especially the ones closest to the dance floor. There was the usual Southern Arizona mix of ranchers and desert rats along with a big group of suburbanites that might have driven out from Tucson. A long table in the back was packed with leather-vested bikers and their women. A hard-looking bunch, the women maybe hardest of all.

Calico came in, beautiful in a black dress and heels. She walked up to the stage, talked with Disco Shirt for a bit, then nodded, shook the man’s hand, and found a place by herself in a shadowed corner at the far end of the bar. Early tried his best to make eye contact but he might as well have not existed.

Half an hour later the band kicked off their first song to a standing-room-only crowd—Rolling Stones’ “Miss You,” Disco Shirt doing a

very passable Jagger. They dove straight into Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues," then the Doobies' "China Grove."

Early leaned over to Jake's ear, shouting to be heard over the thump of the bass. "I wonder if they know any slow stuff?"

Jake glanced down the bar toward Calico. "She doesn't look to be in the dancing mood, amigo. I wouldn't go there."

"The only people who don't succeed are the ones who never try, man."

"Your funeral."

"Or my wedding."

Jake shook his head. "Early, you could sell underwear to a nudist colony, I'll give you that, but I got five bucks that says you're not dancing tonight."

The Lost Prophets started into "When a Man Loves a Woman." The skinny drummer took lead vocal, nailing it so perfectly, Percy Sledge would've held up a lighter.

Early grinned. "Five bucks. You're on, brother. Watch the master work."

"Can't wait."

Calico looked up as he approached. "You really need a different hat, man. It's Early, right?"

"You remember my name. That's a good sign. This could be the start of something beautiful."

"Don't get your hopes up. It's just not a name you hear every day, that's all."

"Neither is Calico."

She lifted her glass. "Here's to inventive parents. Now, save yourself the embarrassment and go back to your stool. Easier on everyone if you don't ask me."

"Ask you what?"

"I hope you don't play poker with that face. Whatever you and your buddy bet on us dancing, just go pay him and get it over with."

"How do you know we bet?"

She turned her black eyes on him. "I own and operate what's basically

a biker bar on hell's back porch. And, if you'll check, I'm still alive. That makes me a student of human nature the hard way. You bet your friend you could get me to dance. Am I wrong or right?"

"Five bucks. But that part was his idea. All I wanted to do was dance with you."

"Wow, all I'm worth is five bucks?"

"Hardly. Also I'm sorry about saying you didn't look like a Bob this afternoon. I didn't know about your dad."

"I take it Ray told you about my dad."

"He did."

"Nothing's private in a small town, is it?"

"I guess not. Anyway, I'm sorry."

"You didn't know. Don't worry about it. But the answer's still no. Go pay your friend and get it over with."

"He said you wouldn't do it."

"Smart guy. I'd keep him around."

"Believe me, even if I had a choice, he sticks to a person like a cold. He's a saddle bronc man. Even a bad horse can't shake him. C'mon, give me a break. Prove him wrong on this one. Guy thinks he's always right."

"Is he?"

Early considered. "Pretty much, yeah. Probably what makes him so irritating."

"Hate to tell you, but he nailed it tonight. I'm here as a spectator. And a bar owner. That's it."

"What, you have two left feet and you don't want to embarrass yourself?"

She didn't smile. "I dance sometimes. And when I do, believe me, there's nothing wrong with my feet."

"Just not with Baptists?"

"I thought Baptists didn't dance anyway."

"They don't, but I'm a free agent in the religion department. That being the case, you don't have to kiss me. But a dance couldn't hurt, could it?"

“Look, it’s not gonna happen, okay? Sorry.”

He smiled. “You don’t sound all that sorry.”

“All right, I kinda lied about the sorry part. Sue me.”

Early leaned against the bar, looked at the band. They were tearing through “(Hey Baby) Que Paso” by the Texas Tornados. “Man, I didn’t even make the eight second buzzer, did I?”

“You never made it out of the chute, pal. I told you not to try.” Her eyes softened, but only a little. “Don’t feel bad. Brad Pitt couldn’t have gotten me out there tonight.”

Early touched his hat brim. “All right. But you don’t know what you’re missing. If you change your mind . . .”

“Tell you what, if I do, Brad Pitt’ll be the first to know.”

Early felt a tug on his sleeve and turned but didn’t see anyone. Another tug and he looked down. A minuscule woman, couldn’t have topped five feet, smiled up at him. Blonde pixie haircut. Her denim dress floor length with tiny silver boot toes sticking out from beneath it.

Her eyes crinkled. “Dance, cowboy?”

Early grinned back. “I guess we could try, but would it be physically possible?”

“We put a man on the moon, didn’t we? I think we could manage this.”

“You got a point.”

“Early, Ingrid. Ingrid, Early,” Calico said.

“Ingrid as in Bergman,” the little woman added.

“Early as in Early,” Early said. “You really want to dance?”

“You shy or something?”

“Ingrid as in Bergman, I’m about as not-shy as they come. All right, lead on. We’ll let Calico Foster sit here and wait for Brad Pitt, show her what she’s missing.”

Ingrid proved herself to be quite the dancer, even if she was so far down there Early was afraid he might step on her. He found himself having a good time. For a little while the mandatory leave order and even Gomez Gomez’s ghost faded into the bar smoke and bass thump. They danced for several songs, fast and slow, until the band announced

they were taking a break. Ingrid hugged his waist and promised to find him again later. He waved as she scooted off.

Jake was still perched on his stool. He slid Early a fresh Mexican Coke. "That, my friend, was a sight I'll never forget if I live to be a hundred and ten. I truly thought you were going to bust her nose with your knee."

"Don't knock Ingrid as in Bergman, it's dangerous. She teaches kick-boxing down in Patagonia."

"Yeah?"

"No joke. Now pay me my five bucks."

Jake pushed his hat back on his head. "How do you figure that? Calico turned you down exactly like I said she would."

"And I quote, 'Early, you could sell underwear to a nudist colony, but I've got five bucks that says you're not dancing tonight.' Am I wrong?"

"Sounds about right."

"Well, brother, I was a dancing fool. And I got a blonde elf who's hands are registered as lethal weapons as a witness."

Jake pulled out his wallet and flipped Early a five. "Accent on the fool. Anyway, the spectacle was worth every penny."

Early pulled off his hat and wiped his brow. He picked up the Coke. He was mid swallow when Jube stopped in front of him, scowling up.

"Heya, Jube, book get slow?" Early said.

"Ray said you was a police detective. He lyin' or is that true?"

"I'm a detective with the Paradise Police Department. Why?"

Jube grunted something Early took to mean approval in Jube-speak. "All right then. I'm goin' out back for a smoke. Bring your Coke. I gotta talk to you about somethin'."

CHAPTER FIVE

CALICO PACED THE LITTLE APARTMENT she'd called home since she was twelve. Two bedrooms and a bath. The end unit in a block of six motel rooms. Her father had built the motel addition and swimming pool just after they'd come, convinced it would attract more of the desert tourists and add to the income.

The tavern had been her father's dream. He'd always claimed he craved the empty space the desert provided, that Phoenix's urban sprawl had been too confining, though Calico strongly suspected what he really wanted was to escape the shadow of his wife's memory. Funny how every corner of such a huge city could be so utterly haunted by a single spirit. Even so, Bob Foster's had been a stubborn and eternal optimism, making his dreams contagious by nature. *Unless you're the one who has to pick up the pieces.* Bob's Place had been to Bob Foster what the Magic Kingdom had been to Walt—a dream that had become reality that had become everything.

True, he'd been alcohol addled, a sometimes grifter, and an always hopeless dreamer who was far better at talking than doing, but he'd loved his children in his own way. And Calico had loved him, even if the roles of parent and child too often blurred and flipped. Maybe that love was why Calico was still doing her best to keep his dream alive. *More like, what else am I going to do?* But she did love One Horse in all its backward, sunbaked glory. And she'd come to realize she loved the bar too. *And now I'm going to lose it all. How can this be happening?*

Even worse, losing Bob's Place wasn't her biggest problem. Reflexively, she checked her phone. Nothing from Charlie. No text, no call, no Charlie. Her brother the phantom. She tossed the phone onto the couch, walked to the window, hugged her arms to her body, and looked out at the darkening landscape. It was that magical desert time when the whole world turned to silver and soft shadow. A faraway-so-close moon hung low on the horizon. The same moon that had whispered comfort to her soul for as long as she could remember. But tonight she was light on the silver and heavy on the shadow. The pool lights threw blue ripples on the saguaros. Beyond the pool, the long-fallen sun left a vague purple memory above the mountains. She'd always loved the desert, even as a kid. All the sky and space—this was her home.

But it was never enough for Charlie.

Not that the two hadn't been close back in the day. They had been, even though he was younger than Calico by four years—now twenty-five to her twenty-nine. But with her father's attention often elsewhere she'd too often been forced into the role of mother rather than sister. It also didn't help that Charlie had inherited his father's penchant for the "next big thing."

In Charlie's mind, the next big thing had meant only one big thing—California. Specifically, Los Angeles. The promised land, nirvana, and utopia all rolled into a shining tangle of beaches, movie stars, convertibles, and possibilities. The day before his eighteenth birthday, Charlie had shaken their father's hand, kissed Calico's cheek, pointed his old El Camino west, and let the tires spit gravel. Left his family with nothing but the memory of a smile and a loose agreement to keep in touch. Surprisingly, he actually had for the most part.

Charlie, where are you?

A knock on her door pulled Calico from her reverie. Had to be Jube. Something wrong in the bar. Which was unusual because Jube was a man who would rather lose a limb than ask for help. She shifted the curtain a bit and looked out. Not Jube. Early, still wearing that stupid *Kiss Me, I'm Baptist* hat. The guy never gave up. She walked over

to the door and cracked it, leaving it chained. After all, this was her personal space. The only one she had. "Sorry, I'm off. Can I help you with something?"

He looked even taller standing out there in the glow of the porch light. He was lean, muscular, and one of the few men she'd ever encountered who made her feel short at her six feet. She hadn't noticed in the bar, but he had a scar angling up from one corner of his mouth nearly to his eye. He was dark, like her. Sun, definitely, but something else too. Maybe Hispanic. Or some Native. His face looked angular and hard in the one-sided light.

He pulled a billfold out of his back pocket. "I know you're off work. I don't mean to bother you. It's just that Jube sent me."

"Jube? Is something wrong?"

"No, not really. He told me you were having some trouble and might want someone to talk to. Thought I might be able to help."

Her face heated and she was glad she was shadowed. "Jube said that? Why in the world would he think I'd want to talk to you?"

He flipped the billfold open and held it up. The porch light gleamed off an official-looking star. He passed it through the door crack.

She looked it over, then studied him. "You're a policeman?"

"I'm a detective up in Paradise."

"You don't look like a detective."

"Congratulations. You're the millionth customer to say those exact words. You just won a knife set and a year's supply of Bisquick."

She handed his identification back. "Jube doesn't usually talk so much. I think I like him better that way. Did he tell you what my trouble is? Or troubles?"

Early scratched the side of his neck. "Look, can I come in? I promise I'm mostly housebroken. Or if you're uncomfortable with me in there, we can find somewhere out here to sit and talk. Might be easier to communicate if it wasn't through a chained door."

She hesitated. The guy wasn't exactly what you'd call safe looking. But the badge and ID looked real enough.

A corner of his mouth turned up. "I'd say trust me, but you don't

seem like the trusting type. Which I understand. You can't be too careful these days."

She sighed, pushed the door closed, unchained it, then swung it open. "I guess if you're an ax murderer you might be a blessing in disguise."

He followed her in. "Can't be that bad. Thanks, I kinda thought you'd leave me out there."

"I would've, but I liked the way you danced with Ingrid. I figure you can't be all that horrible. Except for your taste in headwear." She turned, and he'd removed his hat and held it in his hands in front of him. His dark hair hung almost to his shoulders. Cheeks flat, pocked with old scars. The wildness about him much too big for her little apartment. Her instinct told her to take a step back, but she stayed put. "Why aren't you working? Are you on vacation or something?"

"I'm on mandatory leave."

"Mandatory as in you're in trouble?"

"Usually."

"Is that supposed to impress or scare me?"

"Neither. It's just the truth."

She thought about that for a second. "Well, I guess I should offer you a beer or something, right? That's what people do."

"I'm fine."

"That's right, you're the Coke guy. You and alcohol don't mix, that the deal?"

"Let's just say as long as I stay a Coke guy, the world is a much happier and safer place for all concerned."

"Now that I understand. I've seen my share of ugly drunks."

"In your business, I'm sure you have. Good news is I'm beautiful when I'm sober."

"Is that thing on your face supposed to be a win-me-over grin or something? Does it actually work on people?"

"Once in a while."

She pointed to a chair. "All right then, Detective Early Pines, sit."

He eased his frame onto a chair, stretched out his long legs in front

of him, and crossed his ankles. He wore a faded blue pearl-button shirt and boot-cut jeans. Both had seen better days. His boots were scuffed, one with a hole almost through the sole. He appeared completely at ease, and Calico got the feeling this was a part of him that wouldn't change no matter the environment, be it her living room, a rodeo chute, or a Manhattan penthouse.

She lowered onto her couch, facing him. "Okay, since we're here and Jube'll never let me hear the end of it if I don't talk to you, how much did he tell you?"

"Only that you were having some trouble with your brother out in LA."

"That's all he said?"

"Pretty much. But I could tell he's plenty worried about you."

She stood, walked to the fridge, and pulled out a bottle of Perrier. She held it up. "It's not Coke, but . . ."

"No, thanks. And it won't bother me if you have a beer."

"I don't drink. Just keep a few beers in the fridge for guests. Which I never really have so they've been in there for a while." She twisted the cap off the bottle, sipped, then set it on the counter. She didn't sit again. "I don't want to waste your time. I honestly don't see how a detective from Paradise, Arizona, would possibly be able to help with my Los Angeles problems."

He shrugged. "I might not, but try me. You never know." That grin again. She noticed he had a crooked incisor tooth. For some reason she couldn't put her finger on, it made her feel a little more comfortable with him. She looked down at her hands, then back at him. "My brother's name is Charlie. He dropped off the face of the earth about three weeks ago."

"You have regular contact with him?"

"Every few days or so. A week at the longest."

"Three weeks isn't that long not to hear from someone."

"Long enough if you know Charlie. Something's wrong."

"What do you mean, if you know Charlie?"

She considered him. This all felt way too personal. Then again,

maybe it'd be good to talk about it. It might help her sort some things. And the guy was a stranger. She'd probably never see him again, so why not? "Charlie's the kind of guy, well, if you put him in an empty room, he'd find a way to get himself in trouble. Set it on fire or something. And of course it's never his fault. I love him, but that's the way it is."

"Los Angeles is a very big room. And it's definitely not empty."

"Exactly."

"Is his phone on?"

"It rings, so I think so. I've called and called, but nothing."

"How about the police? Have you talked to them?"

"I tried."

"What did they say?"

"I called them after about the first week. They said they'd look into it. I haven't heard anything since. And the woman I talked to didn't inspire a whole lot of confidence by her tone. Lousy bedside manner you detectives have."

"Yeah, sometimes. But to them your brother is one more guy missing in LA. And he'd only been off the map a few weeks. They've probably got a very long to-do list."

"Okay, but that doesn't help me, does it? Or Charlie."

"Does Charlie usually call you, or do you call him?"

"Does that matter?"

"Maybe. You never know."

"I call him every once in a while, but he calls mostly."

"Tell me more about him."

"We moved out here from Phoenix with our dad when we were kids."

"Just the three of you?"

"My mom died not long before that."

"How?"

"That's a little personal."

"Fair enough. Sorry."

She picked up her Perrier bottle but didn't drink. "The official cause

of death was breast cancer. But I'd add a terminal case of disappointment to that diagnosis. That's what really did her in." He didn't say anything, and the silence made the room feel too close so she went on. "My dad always had a plan, always on the verge. I think my mom finally just got tired."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. When we came, I was twelve. Charlie was eight. We were chasing my dad's latest dream—a desert oasis for the masses. The next Palm Springs. The whole world was gonna flock to us and lay hundred-dollar bills at our feet." She waved a hand. "And here it is in all its glory."

"It's not so bad."

"No, and I didn't mean it that way. I actually love it here. But Charlie never wanted Palm Springs. He wanted bigger, even as a kid. So he moved out to Los Angeles seven years ago."

"What'd he want to do in LA?"

"I don't know, have the world notice him? I think deep down he was just tired of being bored. He wanted to get out of here and be somewhere things happen. He said he might try acting, but every kid headed west says that, right? You never really expect them to do it. Funny thing is, I don't think he'd been there a week before he landed a part in a commercial. Then a few more. Then a string of bit parts in some B movies. He called every few days and gave us updates. Sometimes he asked for money. Usually he didn't. He was always on the cusp of a big break. Always sounded at least sort of happy. I was just glad to hear he wasn't doing drugs or getting into anything else that might hurt him."

"Are drugs a possibility?"

"I honestly don't think so. But then again, it's Charlie. I don't want to be the person that buries her head in the sand."

"He like to push people's buttons? Get in fights?"

She did smile now. "I can't picture Charlie in a fight. He's pushed a few buttons in his life, most of them mine, but I wouldn't say he did it out of malicious intent. The thing about Charlie and trouble . . . he's

not the type to go looking for it, it seems to find him on its own. And when it does, he doesn't try all that hard to get out of the way. If you'd met our dad, you'd understand. Charlie's the proverbial chip off the old block."

Early nodded. "I do understand. Guy like Charlie in a big city, a lotta things could go wrong, I see why you worry. I'm sure you've racked your brain—do you have any thoughts at all about what might've happened to him? Maybe something he said leading up to this that sounded unusual or off? Even a feeling?"

"The only thing I can think of is, a few months before he died, our dad took out a good-sized second mortgage on Bob's and loaned it to Charlie. A hundred thousand dollars. Charlie had some kind of business opportunity in the works and said he'd have the money back within a month. Two peas in a pod, Dad never even asked questions. Not even when the money didn't come back."

"What kind of opportunity?"

"All I know is, Charlie said it was a sure thing. He talked to Dad about it, but I never heard details. They'd never tell me anything like that because they knew I'd be against whatever harebrained scheme it was. I was always the wet blanket. Then again they never considered how the lights stayed on and the AC kept working."

"So nothing about the deal?"

"Dad said Charlie had figures and charts, the whole thing. He acted like he was as excited about whatever it was as Charlie."

"But the sure thing wasn't so sure after all."

"Are they ever? Either way, I never heard. Charlie said it wasn't any of my business."

"Except for the pesky fact that now the money's gone and you're the one stuck with the loan."

She shrugged. "It's a good-sized payment every month and I'm struggling to make the bills. I've cleaned out the savings. I'm about done. So enjoy the room while it lasts."

"Unless Charlie coughs up the money he borrowed."

"Yeah, unless that. But now he's in who knows what kind of trou-

ble. And I have no idea what's going on or what to do. Still glad you knocked, detective?"

He showed that crooked incisor. "Beats television."

"The thing is, when Charlie came home for Dad's funeral, I asked about the money. He thought it should be considered his inheritance. I told him fine, then he could also inherit the debt to the bank, because I sure didn't want it, and I was the one here grinding it out every day, even though technically he owns half of the place. He gave some speech about how it takes money to make money, and I gave him a speech back about how I was about to knock his head off. We made up, but he left straight from the memorial. After that, whenever I brought it up, he'd make excuses, give me some runaround, and promise he'd pay off the bank any day. But guess what? It's been a lot of days and I'm still making payments."

"Anything else?"

She studied the bottom of his boots. "Yeah. I may want to wring his neck, but I'm also worried sick about him. When the police didn't do anything, I found a private investigator online that worked cheap. I thought I could afford him. At least for a few weeks."

"And?"

"He poked around for exactly two days, then called and said he'd done all he could. He asked me to pay for what I owed and that was that. I asked him if he couldn't keep at it a little longer, that it didn't seem like enough time. But he was adamant, couldn't get off the phone fast enough."

"You think he found something and didn't want to tell you?"

"All I know is it didn't make sense. One day he was all over it and the next he was history."