

“Meet Calico, Bones, Jimmy, Cozy, Nelson, and a couple of thugs named Sal and Rufus who all meet up at the Venus Motel somewhere in the desert outside of Paradise, Arizona. The lives of this colorful cast of characters become intertwined by—and ultimately turned upside down by—a “magic” box that makes things disappear . . . forever. *Venus Sings the Blues* is delightful, unforgettable, and quirky, another brilliant work by one of today’s finest storytellers. Keep ’em coming, Buck Storm!”

ANN TATLOCK, award-winning novelist, editor, and
children’s book author

“Tears of joy met me on the pages of this book as I traced the path from brokenness to redemption in each character. The reminder that our past doesn’t have to dictate how our story ends is eclipsed only by the lesson that love cannot be earned. People can change, and the words contained here can be part of that process. Enjoy!”

ROBERT CASE, senior pastor, Calvary Chapel Eastside

**VENUS
SINGS THE
BLUES**

BUCK STORM



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Venus Sings the Blues

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Lyrics from “Goodbye from Venus” by Buck Storm, 2018.

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*When I was fifteen, I made a trade for a 1972 Honda
CB 360 with a faded orange gas tank and a seat cover
made from an old piece of carpet. It was beautiful. In
the span of a single, small-town Arizona afternoon,
I became invincible.*

*I'm not saying the story you're about to read is mine
exactly, but who knows, maybe it's yours.*

*To all you dreamers out there working hard to get your
bikes running, maybe they will, maybe they won't.
But know this—whether you jump over Evel Knievel's
Snake River Canyon and wheelie over the sun, or never
get past the corner Circle K convenience store, you are
magnificently, perfectly, and endlessly loved.*

The road is only beginning.

Hit the gas, kid. This is for you.

*Past the edge of town
Out where the world ends
The desert gives the sky
Nothing but silence
There's an old motel
The sign is a shimmering Venus
Even though she smiles
Her eyes are sad . . .
—“Goodbye from Venus”*

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE wide Arizona afternoons. The quiet kind, where tall piles of pillowy clouds pull their shadows across the valley floor, everything sand and sage and sunlight and sharp angles. Where the sky is so deep it feels endless, and hawks dip and circle on the updrafts and never get tired.

Bones was sweeping yesterday's stardust off the sidewalk when the biker rolled out of the desert and into the parking lot of the Venus Motel. That's how life works sometimes. One second all is calm all is bright, and the next the gods or angels or aliens or whatever insert something like this guy with a rattle of pipes and a cloud of dissipating dust. Someone fresh from blasting through the cosmos, sun-streaked hair and muttonchops swept straight back from the lightyears and motorcycle wind. Someone with a hunting knife on his belt and a long mustache that curls up on the ends like a cowboy in an old movie. Jeans and boots and muscles like ropes under his tattoos.

Two eyes surveyed Bones. One ocean-blue and bottomless. Another that looked like someone had spilt milk in it. The blue appeared mildly interested at best. The milky one didn't give a rip. Even from where Bones stood, he could smell the bike's engine. Grease and hot metal. It ticked as it cooled. Its rider made no noise at all.

"Hey," Bones said when the quiet got too heavy. Right away he wished he'd thought of something cooler. For some reason, that milky eye did that to a guy.

The rider dug into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a pack of smokes, then shook one out and stuck it on his bottom lip without lighting it. "You the boss?" His words rolled out thick, like his tongue was coated with honey. Or maybe motor oil.

Bones knew the guy was kidding, but he could spot no humor behind either blue or milk. He played it safe. "Nah. I'm only fifteen, man."

The rider lit the cig, flipped the Zippo shut, and stuck it back into his pocket. Smoke swirled off toward the highway, dipped and ducked. "So? What's fifteen got to do with the price of tea in Bangladesh?" He put the accent on bang.

"I just work here."

That milky eye. "That's cool. Very industrious. You got a name?"

"Bones."

The rider gave a nod as if this were heavy information that required considerable effort to process. "Bones . . . right. That supposed to make you sound dangerous?"

"It's my name, that's all."

"Not much of one, if you ask me. Who gave it to you?"

"I don't know. My mom, probably."

"What kind of mom calls her kid Bones?"

"The kind that left a long time ago. I don't remember her."

Smoke. "Uh-huh. And what? Everybody's supposed to feel sorry for you now?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, I guess you didn't. That's good, at least. You got a last name?"

"Not one I want to say."

More smoke. More milky eye. "After the first one, I don't blame you."

"How about you?"

"How 'bout me what?"

"You got a name?"

"Jimmy La Roux. And if you notice, I don't mind throwing in the last name right off the bat."

“You from Texas?”

Milk. “Why in heaven’s name would you think I’m from Texas?”

“I don’t know. You talk like you’re from Texas.”

“I don’t talk like I’m from Texas even a little bit. I talk like I’m from God’s country. Louisiana, born and raised.” Jimmy La Roux said Louisiana with a modicum of reverence. He used three syllables—*Looz-an-na*—as if four would be sacrilege.

He puffed a few more times. Katydid buzzed in the pepper trees behind the motel. Crazy how such little things could be so loud. “Boss in the office?”

Bones leaned his broom against the wall. “She went up to town. You can wait in the lounge. That’s where she’ll probably be when she gets back. We’re short-staffed, so sometimes she checks guests in and out there.”

“Short-staffed. Yeah, you are pretty short when I consider.” Jimmy La Roux winked, leaned the bike on its kickstand, climbed off, and stretched. “Lounge it is, then, Bones-without-a-last-name.” He pulled a few more puffs, snuffed the cigarette out on the palm of his hand, then flicked the butt onto the gravel.

Bones would be the one who’d have to pick up the butt later, but he couldn’t care less. That palm-snuff was the coolest stinking thing he’d seen anybody do in his life. He pointed down the sidewalk, keeping his tone cool. “Lounge is down there.”

“I did gather that from the sign that says Lounge, but thanks for the heads-up.”

Jimmy La Roux unbuckled a leather pack from the Harley’s rear fender, then slung it over his shoulder and started off with a long-legged, rolling gait. Bones, still reeling from the cig snuff, left his broom and the stardust where they were and followed.

Bones imagined the Venus Motel looked a lot like it had the day it was built back in 1940. Story was it had been a real gathering spot in its day. A desert-road-trip destination for the family set, and at times even a semi-secret oasis for the hip, connected, and famous. Not to mention the *infamous*. Sunsets on the pool deck, piano music drifting

out from the lounge. Rumor had it Sinatra himself had even graced the place.

The lounge especially looked the part. Long, low, and dim. Lots of dark wood. A bar took up half the wall to the right. Behind it, twinkle lights winked around a big mirror and several shelves of bottles, and behind the old-school cash register on the end closest to the door hung a bunch of signed photographs. Some black and white. Some grainy, over-saturated color. They were all autographed. Brigitte Bardot, Ernest Hemingway, Glenn Ford, Angie Dickinson, Dean Martin, Dennis Hopper, and maybe a dozen others. Bones had never actually counted them.

The kitchen door was at the other end of the bar, and across the room a dozen red-leather booths stretched along the wall. Tables took up space on the open floor, and at the far end of the room, an old baby grand piano sat on a low stage above a little dance floor.

Jimmy La Roux paused inside the door and took in the place. He nodded as if the lounge met his approval, then weaved his way through the tables to the stage. He lifted the piano keys' lid, ran his fingers over both black and white, then played a gentle chord.

"You play piano?" Bones said.

"It ain't a fluegelhorn."

"What's a fluegelhorn?"

"Who knows? But this old piano's a beaut."

"I don't know anything about it."

"Didn't ask if you did. I was telling."

The biker played a slow run on the low keys, then started a melody with his right hand on the higher ones.

"What's that?" Bones said.

The milky eye caught the light from the front window. "This, Bones-with-the-lousy-last-name, is what's known as the blues. You know what that is?"

"Yeah. Like Robert Johnson, right?"

The blue eye took him in with newfound appreciation. "You know Johnson's blues?"

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“No, but I read a book about him.”

“Hmm. Can’t read about the blues. That’s like reading about how a chocolate cake tastes. Or a good cigarette. Have a seat and open your ears. Here, listen to this.”

CHAPTER TWO

CALICO FOSTER PUSHED HER used-to-be-blue-but-had-sun-faded-to-dull-silver Ford Tempo up to its max speed of sixty and rolled down her window. If there was one universal and undisputed fact for those who've experienced it, it was that nothing on earth smells as good as the Arizona desert after a rain. A high-desert storm had rolled through this afternoon, and today was no exception. She breathed deep and let the creosote-saturated wind cool her skin and whip her hair. Most days she was impatient to get back to the motel after a trip into Paradise, but today she wished the commute was longer.

She slowed as she neared the Venus, rolling into the parking lot without using her turn signal—no one out here to warn anyway—and pulled to a stop in front of her apartment on the other side of the office from the lounge. A broom leaned against the wall, but no Bones, of course. Keeping that kid on task was like trying to wrangle an entire herd of cats. She mentally cursed him.

She climbed out and looked west over the wide desert basin. She didn't have a choice. In her experience, the desert didn't ask or suggest; it demanded. Especially this valley. There was a sense of permanence here. Ancient and unchanging. It was perfect. Baptized by wind and sun, washed clean by Mexican moonlight and Gulf storms. She'd never in her life seen anything so beautiful.

Not that she was a stranger to the landscape. She'd spent her life in Arizona, much of it helping out with her father's motel and bar and

then running it altogether after he passed. Bob's Place over in One Horse, a tiny crossroads of a town that lived up to its name. But all that seemed like a shadow life now. The dream-reality before her brother disappeared and Detective Early Pines crashed into her world. And then the road trip that changed everything.

Somewhere along the way Pines had become permanent. And so had the Venus. With the money from selling Bob's along with an I'm-sorry-for-my-peccadillo check from her brother, she'd been able to purchase the Venus.

She'd been here for only a little more than a year, but this was home now. The minute she saw the place she knew she'd never leave. She loved the mountains, the valley, the endless sky. And she loved the motel. The place had history, and now she was becoming part of it. It had its ups and downs throughout the decades—at times a prestigious hideaway, other times a roadside dive—but the towering forty-foot Lady Venus sign fronting the highway never failed to offer her sad-eyed, neon smile to the weary traveler.

Calico opened her trunk, then filled her arms to overflowing with supplies and headed for the lounge. A Harley Davidson that hadn't been there when she left leaned on its stand. Hopefully owned by someone who wanted a room.

The lounge door creaked when she pushed it open, slanting sunlight stretching her shadow the length of the room. Juan—mustachioed, black hair slicked, his guayabera crisp and white as always—was wiping down the bar. Bones sat on a barstool drinking what was no doubt a root beer, his favorite. The news was on the TV up in the corner, but the volume was turned down. To Calico's surprise it had been replaced by piano music coming from the darkened stage. Her eyes, adjusting from sun to sudden shadow, could barely make out the form of a man.

"Those sidewalks sweeping themselves out there, Bones?" she said.

"I'm taking a break."

"So I see. More supplies in the car."

"Okay."

"In case you don't know, by that I mean go and get them *out* of the car."

“Yeah, I picked up on that.”

Calico joined Juan behind the bar, set two bags of cleaning supplies on the counter, and then poured herself a cup of coffee. “Who’s the Liberace?”

Juan’s mouth turned down as he gave an I-don’t-know shrug. “I just got here a few minutes ago. He was already up there. Says he’s waiting for you. All I know is he likes his coffee black.”

“He’s got a cool Harley,” Bones said. “It’s parked outside.”

“I saw that.”

Calico flipped a switch on the wall, and a handful of stage lights came to life. The man looked up. Something was wrong with one of his eyes. And although his rough appearance definitely fit the Harley outside, it seemed at odds with the soft tune coming from the piano.

He smiled a little, eyes going back to the keys. “Well, well, ladies and gentlemen. Let there be light.” His voice was low, resonant, and dripping bayou swamp water. Boots as worn as his jeans. Faded black T-shirt. He looked like he was made out of jerky and cigarette smoke and four-letter words.

“You sound pretty good over there,” Calico said.

“It ain’t hard. It’s a nice piano.”

“And that’s your Harley out there?”

“If it ain’t, some hombre back down the road must be plenty mad.”

“How are you doing on coffee?”

“I could use a top off, thanks.”

“Bones. The supplies. Then finish sweeping,” Calico said. She grabbed the coffeepot from the warmer and headed for the biker, then after glancing at Bones, stopped short. “How long are you planning this break to last, exactly?”

Bones lifted the root beer and eyed it. “I’m almost done.”

Calico crossed the room and poured.

The man blew over the rim, then took a sip. “I take it you’d be Calico Foster, owner of this establishment?”

“I’ve been Calico Foster for as long as I can remember and owner of the Venus for a little over a year.”

He held out a calloused hand. "I'm Jimmy La Roux."

She shook it. "Nice to meet you."

"By the look on your face, my name doesn't strike a chord. Am I right?"

"Should it?"

"Probably not. But I been through this way a time or three. Done some hours on this very bench."

"You've played here?"

"Something about that lady out on the highway always seems to call me back. You got anybody working currently?"

"As a piano player, you mean? No. Honestly, I haven't even thought about it."

"How about it?"

"Are you talking about a job?"

"Why not? I got nowhere to be for a couple a weeks."

"How about because I can't afford a piano player, for one?"

"How do you know? We haven't even talked money yet."

"You see those supplies I just brought in? I could hardly afford those. We're not exactly the Hilton."

"Don't say that like it's a bad thing. You're the Venus, and it don't get much better than the Venus."

"Trust me, flattery won't get you the job."

"No flattery. Just the truth."

"We could use some music," Juan said. "It's getting too quiet around here. And I'm tired of the same old, same old on the radio."

"Uh-huh. And are you offering to pay him out of your check?" Calico said.

Jimmy poked a single note. "Things really that tight?"

"New place in up town," Juan said. "Big money. Hotel and lounge. Kind of place the tourists up from Phoenix and Tucson like."

"One of them cookie-cutter deals?"

"No," Calico said. "They did it right. Renovated an old downtown building. I can't imagine what it cost. It's nice, actually."

"Tell you what. What if nothing comes out of your pocket? I'll play

for tips. Been my experience that some good music brings folks in. Maybe you can make a dent in the competition's business."

"Boss, you're not gonna get a better deal than that," Juan said.

"It's a nice piano," Jimmy added. "Still in tune. Deserves to get played a little."

"I don't know anything about pianos," Calico said.

"Take my word for it."

"Look. I don't even know you. No offense."

"Come on. Let him play," Juan said. "It sounds good."

Jimmy stopped playing and leaned his elbows on the piano lid. "Listen, Calico Foster. I don't bite often, and when I do it ain't very hard. Tips ain't gonna cost you nothing, and like I said, I got a couple a weeks to kill."

"I don't like not paying somebody to work. It doesn't feel right."

"They do say the best things in life are free. Tell you what. You can cover my room if it'll make you feel better."

"That might make me feel worse."

"Won't know till you try."

"You're a real salesman."

"That's absolutely not true. I'm probably the worst salesman you'll ever meet."

"Do you actually play the piano for a living?"

"On my good days. You want a resume?"

"You don't look like a musician."

"What about those ZZ Top dudes?" Juan said. "They're musicians."

Juan had a point. "I mean you don't look like a lounge piano player."

Jimmy smiled a little and shuffled through a jazz lick. He *was* good. Maybe not Thelonious Monk good, but the guy was certainly no slouch. "No? What's a piano man supposed to look like?"

"I don't know. Piano-y."

"Like what? Nat King Cole?"

"Thelonious Monk was more in my mind."

"You know Monk?"

"My dad had a big record collection. He loved jazz."

“Monk always wore a hat. I’m not much of a hat man.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ll get the job done. You don’t like it or it don’t work out for some reason, I’ll leave anytime, no questions asked.” He leaned back, looked around the room. “Man, this place has always had a vibe, you know? Ain’t no place up in town ever gonna have a vibe like this. So what do you say?”

“Say yes,” Juan said.

“Oh fine. But I take you at your word. If it doesn’t work, I’ll let you know and off you go down the road. I’ve done this a long time, and you’ll find I’m not the roll-over type, even if I am a woman.”

“I can already tell that.”

“Also, my fiancé is a local police detective. A huge and very protective one.”

“That’s very true,” Juan said. “Guy’s an animal.”

Jimmy smiled again and nodded. “Warning received. Sounds like I got the gig, then.”

“On a trial basis.” She couldn’t let him forget that part.

“Trial basis and the boyfriend’s a cop. Received and understood.”

“Fiancé.” She turned and walked back to the bar. “Let’s see if you do actually get some people to come out.”

“We have ourselves an agreement. Now, you’re the boss. What do you want to hear?”

“We’ll most likely get a handful for dinner later. No point playing to an empty room right now.”

“Ain’t empty. You’re here. Your man over there is here.”

“Juan,” Juan called. “Juan Rojas.”

“See? Juan’s here. Bones with the hateful last name is here.” Jimmy pressed a key, the note drifting up like smoke. “I’m here. Not to mention a place like the Venus has enough haunts and memories to constitute a packed house without us.”

He started in on a song, slow and moody. Only lower notes at first, then bringing in more of the higher keys one or two at a time.

“You’re a blues man,” Calico said.

VENUS SINGS THE BLUES

Jimmy kept playing with his left hand. With his right he picked up his coffee cup, sipped, then set it back down. "Most days. But I got my sunny moments."

"I'll throw in a room," Calico said. "It's not like we have a shortage at the moment. But no smoking, and don't put the bike inside."

"He's housebroke. Probably a whole lot more than me."

"No bikes in the rooms."

"I can live with that."

Jimmy's bad eye gleamed in the light, and he started in on a song in earnest.

CHAPTER THREE

BONES SIPPED HIS SECOND ROOT beer. This was no problem, because after the first one he'd gone invisible. He could sit here for hours, and no one would ever notice.

Most people didn't know invisibility was a practiced skill. It took time and patience. For Bones, it all started at a ranch owned by one of his dad's poker buddies, watching the two men split a bottle of rye whiskey and take potshots at prairie dogs with a .22 pistol.

The whole thing had made Bones a little sick. His dad must have picked up on this, because at one point he'd passed Bones the gun. When Bones refused to shoot, the man had beaten him hard enough his ears rang. He could still see the blood from his nose pooling in the dirt beneath him, feel the rough earth against his body while his dad sucked in a hard breath above him. One last kick, then, "Listen to me, kid. You can either be a prairie dog in this life or you can be the guy with the gun. What you feel like now? That's prairie dog, you hear me? I hope you learned a lesson today. And you're welcome."

Bones *had* learned a lesson. Maybe not the one his dad intended to teach but one he'd never forgotten. *Never ever poke your head out of a hole when the other guys have .22s and pointy-toed boots.*

A second unexpected and vastly more important lesson had come to him several weeks later. That particular part of the rancher's pasture had collapsed into a useless pit from all the unseen digging, and it came to him then with a rush. Live rounds flying or not, invisible

ones weren't without power. In fact, maybe being invisible could get you further than pistols or muscle. So Bones had practiced keeping his head down, becoming an expert in the art of anonymity. Even at school. It wasn't hard. He was small for his age. Nondescript. It was easy to simply become background static. White noise. And once he'd mastered the skill, he'd caved in a few pastures of his own.

Jimmy La Roux fascinated him. Bones had a feeling about the guy, and when he had a feeling, he paid attention. Then again, if he was honest with himself, he'd have to admit maybe he simply felt like spying. Maybe he was bored. It definitely wouldn't be the first time.

Either way, he went invisible so he could stick around the lounge. Stardust could wait. Supplies could wait. Calico could wait.

Jimmy stopped his song long enough to lean down and pull a dented and tarnished rectangular metal box from his pack. He set it on the piano.

"That's quite a tip jar," Calico said from behind the bar.

"This thing? Nah. It ain't for tips."

"What is it, then?"

Jimmy smiled. "What's it look like?"

"An old metal box."

"You got it."

"If it's not for tips, what's it for?"

"I pull it out from time to time. This here just might put a dent in that competition of yours up in town."

"I thought that's what your piano playing was for."

"Little music won't hurt, but between you and me and the lamp-post, there's always another good player right down the street. This old box of mine'll get the pedal to the floor a little quicker."

"I don't get it."

"Come on over and let me show you something."

Calico joined him.

Jimmy pushed his empty coffee cup toward her. "Here. Put this in the box."

"Why?"

“Just do it. It ain’t gonna explode. It’s an old box, not a grenade.”

Calico lifted the lid, studied the inside of the box for a second, then put the cup in.

“Good. Now close ’er up.”

She did.

“Now open it.”

She did. Then stared. “It’s gone.”

“Gone like it was never there in the first place,” Jimmy said.

“You have a magic box?”

“Nope. No such thing as a magic box.”

“You know what I mean. A trick box, or whatever they’re called. So what’s next? You make the cup come back? Or it appears someplace else?”

“Nope. It’s done. Something goes into the box, it’s gone for good. End of story.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“A trick box will bring people into my lounge?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“My uncle used to pull coins from our ears. I hate to burst your bubble, but I don’t think a box with a fake bottom will impress anybody all that much.”

“That’s all right. Only thing on the line is my tips, right?”

“I suppose that’s true. But I’d like to think this place has a little class, you know? Mystique. It has history. A lot of famous people used to come out here.” She pointed to the photos behind the bar. “I’m not sure I want to be the owner who brought in cheap tricks for kids.”

“Making something disappear forever is cheap?”

“Yes, it is. Again, no offense. Maybe you could stick to the piano. Plus you owe me a coffee cup.”

“Second thoughts?”

“I’m a direct person, Jimmy. I don’t want antics. I have a certain standard. Maybe it’s only in my head, but there it is.”

Jimmy nodded as he played. “Standards are important. Let me ask

you a question. If you could drop something in that box, anything at all, and then it would be gone from this world forever, what would it be?”

“I have no idea, and I think you’re changing the subject.”

“I’m not. The subject is the box. Anything. Think about it. Like it was never there.”

“But it wouldn’t really be gone. It would be wherever you put it. Like my uncle’s quarters.”

Jimmy stabbed a couple of blue-note jazz chords. “Where’s the cup?”

“Wherever you put it.”

He stopped playing, and the milky eye came up. He pulled out a cig and stuck it on his lip. “I’ll tell you what. Give me tonight. If the class meter goes down, the box goes away. Like you said, it’ll be only a handful of people.”

“No smoking inside, ever. One night. And you better be good.”

Jimmy winked the blue eye. “That’s one thing I never promise.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“THE THING IS,” DON SAID around an orange-lipped mouth full of Cheetos, “everybody wants a piece of you. It never ends.”

Cozy looked up from her sudoku. He had NASCAR on the television, the volume too loud as usual. “What do you expect? It’s a lot of money.”

“Charity this, charity that. How about the *Don Jenkins* charity? How about that one? They act like I don’t need the money myself.” Don was sprawled on the couch in his boxers and a stained tank top. His toenails needed a trim. Or maybe a go-round with a power grinder.

Early evening sun poured in through the window as Cozy stirred a pot of tomato soup on the kitchen stove. She could see—and despite the TV hear—Don fine from there. The trailer had what the real estate lady called an open floor plan back when they bought it. Cozy remembered thinking how sophisticated that sounded at the time.

“I think you mean the Don and *Cozy Jenkins* charity,” she said.

“Negative. Three people bought the ticket—me, myself, and I. My money. We’ve been over this.”

“Yeah, we have been over it. You bought the ticket with marital funds. It’s *ours*.”

“So you keep saying, *chica*.”

“What I keep saying is that the money’s half mine.”

“But it’s not half yours because I bought the ticket.”

“Google says different, Don.”

“Google can kiss my sweet hind end.”

“Like I said, it’s an issue of marital funds.”

Don tossed the Cheetos bag on the floor. “It’s an issue of you starting to chap my hide. Any funds we have are *my* funds. I’m the only one working, as I recall. What do you even do all day?” He propped himself up on his elbows. “Hey, are you listening? Come pick up this Cheetos bag. You know I can’t abide messes.”

“Pick up your own bag.”

He was getting mad. She could tell. Good. She picked up her sudoku from the counter, snapped her gum, and wrote a number in a box. “And by the way, I do tons of stuff.”

“Tons of stuff, yeah. Name one thing.”

“What do *you* do except go down to the Pick-a-Part and flirt with Tanya?”

“I’m working, not flirting. I got a business to run.”

“Give me a break. You play with cars all day.”

“Play with . . . Do you have any idea what goes into putting a stock car together? Not to mention a crew and a trailer and rig? No, you don’t, because all you do is sing into the mirror and play that stupid crossword.”

She put the sudoku down. “It’s not crossword. And I think I do have an idea. I think I got myself a real good idea when we went through your sprint-car phase. I got an even better idea with that ridiculous monster truck of yours. Cars are *all* you ever talk about, so I think after ten years of being married to you, by now I’m practically an expert on all things that have a motor and suck money out of our pockets.”

Don ran his fingers through his hair. It was thick when they’d met. Black and thick. Old-school rockabilly. Now it was thinning, and he was constantly rubbing his head like he thought that would bring the curls back. He scratched at his bare armpit. “I’m just saying six million won’t go far. I’ll need every thin dime of that.”

“Six and a half million.”

“Whatever.”

“Which is really three and a quarter to you because half of it is mine.”

He sighed. “Not in this life.”

“Take it up with the internet.”

He took a swig of Diet Pepsi—he’d decided he needed to watch his weight—and shook his head. “Let me ask you a question. What would someone like you even do with three million dollars?”

“I’ll tell you exactly. First, I’d buy one of those houses across the road and get out of a stupid trailer for once in my life.”

Don laughed. “Get out of a trailer? You? Cozy, you were born in a trailer, and you’ll die in a trailer. And when you do they’ll dig a huge hole and bury you in that trailer. That’s one thing you can put down in ink.”

“Say what you want. I’m getting my money.”

He sat up. “Tell you what. When I win my first big race, maybe we’ll talk about a house.” His mad was fading, and he was getting that look in his eyes like he always did when he thought he’d come out on top. “Hey, did I tell you how hot you’re looking today?”

“Gross.”

He crunched a Cheeto, grinning as he chewed with his mouth open.

The soup was bubbling, so she turned off the burner. “Anyway, you already won *the* big one. You won the Mega. You don’t need to win a race to buy a house.”

“You get to tag along, so why are you whining?”

“I’ve been tagging along behind you for years. For what? I want my money, and I want my house.”

“You don’t like this trailer, maybe you should just leave. You thought about that?”

“Every minute of every day.”

“Yeah, right.” He licked at the orange spit collected in the corners of his mouth and laid back down on the couch again, his hand behind his head. “The money’s going to the team, end of subject. Come on over here.”

“Stop. Get a sponsor. That’s what you did before.”

“Yeah, for dirt-track stuff. But Bob’s Texaco and Burger Heaven won’t fund my way to the big leagues. Six and a half million won’t even do that, but it’s a start.”

“Three and a quarter.”

He looked at the TV and stuck three fingers in the waistband of his boxers. “We’re not talking about this anymore. Once we get on the circuit, we’ll be set for life.”

“I have dreams too, Don.”

He slapped his forehead, yelling at the television. “No! Take him on the inside! Ugh, what an idiot!”

“Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard you.”

“What did I say?”

“How should I know?”

“I said I have dreams too.”

He still didn’t look at her. “What dreams?”

“You know exactly what dreams.”

“No, Cozy, I don’t know what dreams because you talk constantly and never actually say anything. I swear, I can’t keep any of your babbling straight. You gonna pick up that bag?”

“You know I want to sing. I’m gonna make a recording. They got a place down in Tucson that’ll do it all for you. All you have to do is show up.”

He crunched his Diet Pepsi can and then threw it in her direction. She picked it up and dropped it into the trash. She could take only so much mess. “Did you hear me, Don? Are you even listening?”

He looked at her now. “You want to sing into a microphone in Tucson. I heard. So what?”

“I could do it.”

“You’d embarrass me, is what you’d do.”

“It has nothing to do with you. You don’t know anything about it.”

“I got ears, don’t I? I been listening to you howl for years. Trust me, Cozy, let it go. Get me another Pepsi.”

“Get your own Pepsi.”

"I'm serious. Don't make me tell you again."

"You know what you are? Emotionally abusive. That's what they call people like you."

"Uh-huh. What do they call ear abuse? Because if that was a crime, they'd lock you up and throw away the key."

"You grin like you just won some presidential debate when you really sound like a seventh grader making fun of a girl he has a crush on. You got a crush on me, Don?"

"Yeah, come over here."

Cozy picked up her sudoku.

Don was wiping Cheetos goop off his mouth with the hem of his shirt. "Girl, any crush I had on you died a slow death ten years ago. Where'd you hear about all that emotional abuse crap? On *Dr. Phil*?"

"Everybody's heard of emotional abuse. You do it all the time, and I'm sick of it."

"If you're abused, call the cops."

"I don't want the cops. I want three and a quarter million and a house across the street and a recording of me singing."

"I'm gonna win more than we've ever dreamed of."

"*We've* never dreamed that. You have. And you've been saying the same thing for the last decade."

"It takes money to make money. Haven't you ever heard that? Now I got me some money, so I'm gonna make a whole lot more."

"Yeah? Print it on a T-shirt."

"A better car, and nobody'll stop me. I'm unbeatable with the right car. Facts are facts. You can't argue with facts."

"Yeah, facts are facts. And the fact is, with your race record, you might as well flush that money down the toilet."

"I'll tell you what I'm *not* wasting money on. I'm not wasting it on some stucco McMansion so you can play rich girl. You might as well get that out of your head right now."

"And I'm not wasting money on a truck and trailer and stupid car so you can run around and lose races. So you get *that* out of *your* head."

"It's not your choice."

VENUS SINGS THE BLUES

She walked over, picked up the remote, and switched off the television. "I told you. Google says different. I'm serious about that."

They stared at each other, the clock on the kitchen stove banging railroad spikes.

"Give me the clicker, Cozy."

"No."

"Give me the clicker."

"No."

"Give it to me."

"No."

He grinned. "You know how I like it when you get mad. Come over here and sit down."

"Take me seriously, Don."

"I can't. Come here."

"I'd honestly rather die."

He was still grinning. "I hate you a little more all the time. Have I told you that?"

She tossed the remote onto his Cheetos-fingered chest and went back to her soup. "Only every day, Don. Only every day."

CHAPTER FIVE

CALICO LEANED AGAINST THE LOUNGE doorway and watched Bones sweep, little puffs of dust coming up from the broom. Maybe today he'd finish the job.

The kid was too smart for his own good, that was the problem. One of his problems, anyway. They seemed to be legion. He had the mouth to go with the brain too. At least he did when he talked at all. Dirty blond, shaggy hair. Holes in his Levi's, bony knees poking through. A Ramones T-shirt a size too small that looked like it hadn't been washed in . . . well, ever. How did a kid that age know about the Ramones? They were even before her time. He had clean clothes available—she'd seen to that—but he seemed to make a point of ignoring them.

“Hey,” she called when he was almost to the far end of the walk. “Don't forget the pool.”

He gave a thumbs-up without turning around.

He'd had a hard time. She should be gentler. And she *wanted* to be gentler. But every time she opened her mouth, the wrong thing seemed to come out. It was like a vicious cycle. The more frustrated she became with her own inadequacy, the more she seemed to point it at him, and that only fueled her feelings.

The nearly empty parking lot didn't help her mood. A newer-model Dodge pickup and a Land Rover sat parked outside the only two rooms with paying guests. The Dodge had some kind of state insignia on the side she hadn't noticed when it came in. The Land Rover looked

like it had been beaten with bats, turned sideways, and rolled down a mountain. The couple it belonged to looked like the kind who wanted it that way. Road-less-traveled adventure types.

Both rooms would be empty by tomorrow morning.

Jimmy La Roux's Harley was acting housebroken in front of room fourteen. What had she been thinking yesterday? He played fine, but come on. The guy looked like a convict. Not at all what she dreamed for the Venus. And the weird box that made things disappear? It all sounded like the beginning of a real-life crime drama straight from Bizarro World.

On top of that, she'd been semi-bluffing when she mentioned having a fiancé for protection. Not that Pines didn't exist, or that he wasn't huge, or that he wasn't a police detective. His location at the moment was the problem. The department had loaned him out to some little town up in the mountains without a detective of their own. Someone was killing cattle up there, and he'd had his hands full with the case. He'd be there for at least several more days, but she didn't really know how long he'd need.

At least Jimmy hadn't done the box thing last night. She'd made up her mind to revisit the decision to let him be her motel's entertainment, but she had to admit she'd enjoyed the music. With only a handful of patrons, he'd played quietly, and no one had complained about the way he looked.

A couple more guests were scheduled to arrive within the next two days. One even wanted a room for an indefinite amount of time. But a few booked rooms here and there wouldn't even cover the electric bill.

It wasn't about losing the place. She'd paid cash for it, so at least no bank was breathing down her neck. But her savings were down to the bottom of the barrel. And anyway, business was business. Black meant good, red bad, and her books were starting to look like a page out of a King James Gospel. The lounge usually brought in a few ranchers for dinner or beers, occasionally a back-road wanderer or two, but nothing she could count on.

"Ride the horse as long as it's still walking," her dad had always said.

And she would. She'd never abandon the Venus. It needed her like she needed it.

She looked down the sidewalk at the motel's turquoise doors and whitewashed brick. Bones was nearly to the end, but he'd be a few more minutes. She crossed the parking lot and made her way to the far end of the pool, then leaned her arms against the fence, looking west across the valley and the darkening sky beyond. The Venus might struggle a little, but nothing could stop an Arizona sunset.

Her phone chirped in her pocket, and she pulled it out. "It's about time. I want you to know I'm very close to being bored to death, and I blame you."

"How's the sunset?"

"Come home and see."

"I would if I could."

"I'm kidding, Pines. I know you have to work. I'm a big girl." She could picture him on the other end of the satellite. Detective Early Pines was less than a quarter Navajo but looked more. Dark hair to his shoulders. Nose angled a bit to the left. Scar running up his cheek from the left side of his mouth. What was the expression? A face only a mother could love? Make that a mother and Calico Foster. "Sounds like a lot of people there. Where are you?"

"Some barbecue place. Guy's gotta eat."

"A barbecue restaurant sounds ironic considering you're there to investigate dead cows."

"Kinda does. Come to think of it, maybe I should get paid for eating. I could call it research."

"Just remember to leave some food for the rest of the town. I know you. How's the sunset there?"

"Not great—and behind a mountain so it's pretty much gone."

Calico glanced at the bottle in her hand. "Hey, guess what I'm drinking right now?"

"I have no idea."

"That's why I said to guess. You really are dim sometimes, Pines."

"When are we getting married?"

“Guess what I’m drinking.”

“Mexican Coke.”

“How did you know?”

“Because that’s what I drink and you miss me. When are we getting married?”

“I’m drinking a Mexican Coke because it’s cold and tastes good. Don’t give yourself so much credit.” She sipped.

“I say we do it in October. And I hope you haven’t made a pros-and-cons list about a date.”

“Don’t bash my lists, Pines. They’re very helpful.”

“So you keep saying. I’d like to burn that notebook of yours.”

“That’s just mean.”

“No, it’s just love. You’re probably writing in it right now.”

“Wrong. It’s under the counter in the lounge. But pros-and-cons lists are a logical way to approach decision-making. At least, they help me.”

“I don’t even want to know what the cons are on the Early Pines list.”

“I don’t have an Early Pines list.”

Thin music in the background. Old country. “No? Never?” Pines said.

“All right. There was an Early Pines list at one time. A long time ago. But you’re one entity that defies logic.”

“Is that code for way too many cons are on that list but you love me anyway?”

“October’s in two months.”

“So?”

“It’s right around the corner.”

“So?”

“So now that I’m hooked on Mexican Cokes, I might need some time to lose weight so I can fit into a wedding dress. That takes time.”

“You’re perfect.”

“Not if I keep drinking these.”

“Buy a bigger dress.”

“We’ll talk about it when you get back.”

“We’ve done too much talking about it already. Let’s quit talking and do.”

“Maybe. It rained last night.”

“Did it?”

“It still smells good out here.”

“You have a great knack for changing the subject.”

“Pines . . .”

“Yeah?”

Calico turned and looked back at the motel, where Bones was still sweeping. “Did anyone call yet? About Bones? Did they find a place for him?”

He was quiet for a few seconds. “What’s he done now?”

“Nothing, he’s just . . . you know.”

“He’s just Bones.”

“I don’t want to sound mean, but you know how he is.”

“The thing is I don’t know if they *will* find a place. They’ve already kind of run through all the available foster families in town. I don’t want them to ship him somewhere else. He’s been through enough.”

“I know what he’s been through, but if there’s no other choice . . .”

Pines was silent on the other end of the phone.

“What?” she said.

“I’m thinking maybe he can come to my place when I get back.”

“Your place? To stay?”

“Yeah, my place. Why not?”

“As in you might take him in permanently?”

“He’s fifteen. It’s not that permanent. In less than three years he’ll be eighteen.”

“And you were planning on telling me about this when? Because you’re talking about my life too.”

“I know that. It’s just—”

“One breath you want to get married, and in the next you’re taking in a troubled teenager? Don’t you think this is maybe something we should decide together?”

“You’re the one who sounds like she doesn’t want to get married.”

“That’s not true. But if we don’t talk about things, we’ll never make this work. This is big, Pines.”

“You’re mad.”

“Yes, I am mad. You’re very observant. Must be why you made detective.”

“Look. I’m sorry. I should have talked to you about it when I brought him to you, but I had to get up here, and nothing’s set in stone. I just don’t know what else to do with him. And I feel responsible for the kid.”

She sighed. “I know you do. And that’s something I love about you. But it’s us now, not just you. Don’t you get that?”

“Of course I do.”

“And it’s not that I don’t feel sorry for him.”

“I know he can be an acquired taste.”

“It’s not even that.”

“What, then?”

The sun touched the distant mountains, a hot coal on the horizon line. “It’s that I’m not his mom, all right? I’m not cut out for it. He needs someone better at this than me.”

“I’m not asking you to be his mom. Right now all I’m asking is for you to give him a place to stay until I get back. After that, we’ll figure it out.”

“What’s he supposed to do out at your place in the desert all day? School doesn’t start for a while.”

“I’ll bring him to the Venus in the mornings so he can work for you the rest of the summer. Once he’s sixteen he can ride his bike, if he ever gets the thing running.”

“I’m happy to give him a job, especially since I lost Denise. And I’m happy to pay him. He seems to appreciate that part, at least. But there’s a difference between having an employee and raising a kid. I’m not good with teenagers, Pines. In fact, I’m pretty horrible.”

“You’re being way too hard on yourself.”

“Says you, not even here to see me try and fail.”

“If it happens at all, it won’t be forever. And we’ll talk about it first. We’ll talk as much as you want.”

She wanted to talk now. “If you think it’s easy, it’s not. He’s stubborn. I try to get him to dress at least clean if not nice, and look at him. He works when he wants. When he doesn’t want, he’s holed up in the shop messing with that bike of his. That’s another thing. I have a perfectly good guest room in my apartment with an actual bed in it, but he insists on staying out there with the snakes and bugs and who knows what else. Why?”

“I don’t know. He’s independent. It’s what he’s learned, what he knows. Look at his dad. The man basically ignored him his whole life.”

Calico sighed. “He needs real help.”

“He doesn’t trust very easy, that’s all. You can’t blame the kid.”

“I don’t blame him, Pines. I blame you.”

“You’re still mad.”

“I don’t know what I am. This is all way beyond me. Bones is disconnected. He’s *out there*. You know it, and I know it.”

“We’ll figure it out when I get back, all right? Together. I promise. Can you hang in there until then?”

Calico shook her head, ignoring the fact he couldn’t see her. “It’s not a matter of hanging in there. Of course I can hang in there. Ugh, I sound like some kind of monster. I’m as bad as Don Jenkins.”

“Never compare yourself to Don Jenkins. You’re helping, not tossing a kid out on his ear.”

“It’s hard to believe people would foster a child for the money and then kick him out the day they win the lottery.”

“People foster for the money all the time.”

Calico toyed with the rim of the Coke bottle. “I’m sorry, okay? But you’re a detective, not Family Services. You’re not an expert on these things.”

“I’ll talk to him about his clothes. I’ll clean him up.”

“You’re a good man, Pines. And I actually love the way you want to protect him. It’s me, that’s all. I’m not right for this.”

“I promise we’ll figure it out.”

VENUS SINGS THE BLUES

“Find him a place.”

“They just called my number.”

“Go eat.”

“Enjoy the sunset.”

“Sure. Enjoy the dead cows.”