

Prolog

Clovis, New Mexico: June, 2013

The diner sat like an afterthought. It was a worn box thrown at the edge of town, by the side of the road to Albuquerque, drab and unattractive. Still, travelers might stop for coffee or food, surprised by the abrupt end to the shops and restaurants behind them, suddenly aware of the real distance between dots on the map. "This is the beginning of an empty place," the map would whisper. "A place where people might fall into trouble—and no one would know."

Mattie sat in semidarkness near the back of the diner, watching the traffic on interstate 70 flash by in the night. *If Dave was smart, we'd close this sucker up at midnight*, she thought to herself, absent-mindedly flicking the ashes from her cigarette past the table to the floor. *If I get two tips between now and sunup, it'll be a big night*. From time to time she had discussed this thought with Dave, though she knew him to be stubborn on the matter. He had patiently explained that the place cost him about the same, open or shut. Shut, it made no money. Open, maybe a little. *If it's open, here I sit*, Mattie knew.

She stirred slightly and shook a head of loose blonde curls. She rose, smoothing a worn apron across a figure still tempting enough to ensure Dave's business from truckers and cowboys. The rumor was that Mattie padded her tips from time to time with other services for some who stopped by. Like many rumors, this one was based on fact.

Bored and restless, Mattie walked to the front of the diner and peered through the screen door to the road, then back to the cook's station. In the small kitchen sat Pauley, the dishwasher and cook's helper, silent and motionless as a piece of furniture. He wasn't asleep. Mattie knew that if she asked him a question he would respond. How he could sit like that for hours on end astounded her. *If I watered him, he'd grow roots*, she thought.

In the past, on nights like this, Mattie had entertained herself with fantasies involving her and the kitchen help. A few times, thought had led to action. *Like with that young Mex last year*, she remembered, feeling warm excitement flash through her. He'd only lasted a few weeks before Dave threw him out. Pauley had been his replacement. It looked like he would last forever.

"Try your luck with this one, Mattie," Dave had chuckled as he'd introduced them. "If you can get to him, I'll set you up in Dallas myself!" Mattie had been to Dallas already, but the intimation was clear. How had Dave described him? "A crispy critter," yeah, that was it.

Pauley was certainly no prize. Deep, livid scar tissue covered half of his face—almost obscuring one eye, extending down his neck. Even so, he was strong, very strong. Better yet, he was willing to work. The little kitchen had never been so clean. Not dumb, either. Not really. Just ... absent. Part of Pauley never paid full attention when people talked to him. Or maybe part of him had been turned off, a long time ago. How old was Pauley? Part of him, the undamaged part, might be young. The other side of his face was old and terribly damaged. Judging his age accurately was impossible.

Crazy shadow patterns, from headlights shining suddenly through the front window, interrupted her musings. *Maybe some tips after all*, she thought as she turned to face the front door. Sadly, as her first customer in several hours tramped in, she realized she was in for nothing but trouble.

"Is this place open?" asked a short, balding man wearing a loud shirt and baggy, dark blue shorts. As he spoke, he rocked back on his heels—as if trying to view the ceiling without looking up. A stub of well chewed cigar protruded from one side of a fleshy mouth. Matted dark hair on arsenical white skin, dark socks, and some kind of sandals completed the vision.

"It sure is, mister. Won't you have a seat?" Mattie decided to try a businesslike approach.

A wave of hirsute, birdlike arms ended that possibility. "Hell no," the man said. "If I had time to eat, I'd have gone someplace better." The new visitor sniffed audibly, then scanned the diner—and Mattie—in detail.

"I got a Mercedes parked out front that's worth more than this whole fucking place," he said in a loud, braying voice. "I want service. I want a box of sandwiches—I don't care what kind—lettuce, lots of mayo, no onions. I want chips. I want six sodas, cold, in the bottles, with some cups, napkins. I want to be on the road in five minutes. Okay? How much?" The man fumbled for his wallet.

"I don't guess you take American Express?" he smiled a gap-toothed crocodile's grin.

"No, we don't," said Mattie, abashed by the verbal and visual onslaught. "But let me get our cook, and we'll get right on it. While you're waiting, won't you sit and have some coffee? We have a special pie tonight, just ..."

"Jesus Christ Lady! Can't you hear?" The little man brayed. He was swaying from side to side now, his mouth constantly open like a big, square tunnel. "I don't want to stay in this pit. I want my sandwiches! Now!" For emphasis, he gave a little jump.

Amazed by his emotional display, Mattie backed to the serving window. "Pauley, did you hear this guy?" she gasped.

"Yeah ... Mattie. I'm already ... on it." The words stumbled slowly from the kitchen helper's lips. "You ... tell him ... we got some bologna and ... some BLT's. Help me with ... the sodas ... okay?"

Although she didn't turn to look, Mattie could hear Pauley's work in progress. "How long, Pauley?" she whispered. "I want this asshole out of here."

"You help ... with the sodas ... five minutes."

As she reached into the cooler a hand gripped her shoulder. "Who you talking to?" the man wailed. "Gawd! We should have stopped ten miles ago! This place stinks! You guys! You think because it's two in the morning I got to take this crap? I got friends who will put you out of business, you mess with me!" He was so close, Mattie could smell his foul cigar. If she turned, his face would be inches from hers.

"Mister, please." She said, shaking his hand from her shoulder as she spoke. "We'll have your order in five minutes. If you don't like here, then wait in the car."

He shoved past her to look through the serving window. As he did, Mattie noticed the white, sugary residue on his upper lip. Memories of her time in Dallas and other places reminded her. *This guy has just snorted coke*, she realized. That explained a lot.

"Is this what's making food I'm going to eat?" The man said, almost laughing. "Gawd, you're ugly. You wearing gloves? If Lorraine wasn't hungry, I'd

turn you both in to the fucking board of health." With that, he retreated to the front of the room. An uneasy silence followed.

After what seemed like years, Pauley handed Mattie the box of sandwiches. Holding the soft drinks in a plastic bag, she walked quickly to the cash register at the end of the counter. "That'll be \$21.54 with drinks and everything, sir," she said, trying her best to sound professional as the cash register rang.

The man wasn't done. "That's what real restaurants charge," he said with a leer. "You got a head case in the back. Hell, I'm doing you a favor just stopping."

"Pay or leave, mister," Mattie said firmly. "I don't make enough to listen to you anymore. You and your friends can live on nose candy from here to Albuquerque for all I care. You give me any more trouble, I'm calling the sheriff." She felt better, having the counter between them.

"Okay, okay," the man said. "Here's your money. Keep the change." Without giving her a chance to rebuke him further he grabbed his sandwiches and was gone.

"My god, what a scene," Mattie said, shaking her head to clear it. Grabbing the keys from under the cash register, she ran to the front door and locked it. "That's enough for one night," she announced. "I'm locking up." She switched off the peeling neon sign out front.

She turned to look for Pauley, and found him standing in the middle of his kitchen, motionless, head down.

"Are you okay?" Mattie asked, with genuine concern. He was always silent. Now, it seemed to her there was a subtle change to his movements. They were no longer so slow and halting.

"Mattie, go home. Right now." the hulking creature spoke more firmly now, his voice suddenly deeper, husky. His eyes glimmered as they caught the light from the road. "There's going to be trouble here."

"What do you mean, Pauley?" Mattie asked. "Everything's okay now. Look, let's both go on home and get some rest. I'll finish cleaning up. See you tomorrow." Pauley said nothing more. He lurched through the kitchen door, slowly shaking his shaggy head.

Outside in the gravel parking lot, Eddie Balthus trudged back to his car, carrying the sandwiches and drinks. *Got to get on the road*, he thought. *Got to get to a good motel.*

Eddie was a small man, and getting smaller. Middle age was shrinking him from a slight man of middle height to a potbellied gremlin, whose stick-like arms and legs seemed ill-suited to his pear-shaped body. Eddie's checkered life had taught him a valuable secret, or at least he believed that it had. Women—even beautiful women—didn't care what a man looked like, as long as he had the right things. Things like money, and credit cards, and cars, and drugs. How a guy got these things didn't matter, it was how he used them.

Things were power. If a man could surround himself with enough of them, he could be anything. Look at that car. A few dents, but what the hell! Still this side of forty thou, and it was a Benz!

Inside, curled up in the back, Lorraine. Right now, she was the ultimate thing. A knockout! Like from the movies! She was his, his alone, as long as the money and the drugs held out. At least until Vegas. Eddie's mind buzzed. His cocaine-propelled thoughts were strong, noisy fists that pushed doubts out of his brain. Everything was so clear.

Eddie had almost reached the car when a hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. He was so surprised that he dropped the sodas and lifted the box of sandwiches in front of him, as if in supplication. A searing pain became his whole world then, from one side of his abdomen to the other. He looked down, startled to see his stomach parting as a huge, gleaming knife left it, his intestines slowly flowing out. He dropped the sandwiches and sank to his knees, sobbing, trying to gather his dissolving life in his hands, to somehow put the parts back together. There was so much. The pain was incredible.

Eddie's eyes were tearing and couldn't focus when he finally looked up. He never really saw his murderer. It didn't matter. The gigantic knife was back, disappearing from his vision as it slit his throat from ear to ear. His head lolled to one side, hardly held to his shoulders by his almost-severed neck. Eddie pitched forward, dying. As he did, his face caressed the boots of his assailant.

Two hours later, Pauley struggled to surface from deep sleep as hands energetically shook his lower legs. "Get up Pauley! Up, mister! Come on, time to go." said the voice that went with the hands.

Pauley raised a callused hand to cover his eyes, to shield them from the stark light flooding the small room. "Captain," he called, finally more awake than asleep. "Captain, what's wrong?"

His friend, the man who had shared his travels for most of the last five years, sighed and spoke to him gently. "Something bad has happened, Pauley. Near the diner where you work. We have to go now."

Something bad had happened! It hadn't been a dream! Just like those other times, in towns with names he had trouble remembering. He had liked it here. He was sad. Even so, the Captain was right. They had to go. Otherwise, he might be blamed for the awful thing he knew now had really taken place.

Packing up took less than fifteen minutes. Thanks to a kind trucker, they were two hundred miles away by noon. Three days later, they were near Cheyenne.

Chapter 1

Tucson, Arizona: May, 2017

Tucson is a western city—an eye-level city, with few tall buildings. A journey from one edge to another takes several hours, even when traffic has subsided. Over the years, the city has grown to blanket the shallow bowl made by mountain ranges to its north, east, and south.

The murder was discovered in a convenience store parking lot, off Sabino Canyon Road on the way to Bear Canyon—a part of Greater Tucson, but also a place with its own identity. Employees coming on shift at five in the morning discovered the corpse, lying beside his motorcycle at the rear of the lot, obscured from the sight of those working inside. Police arrived at the scene as the sun began its climb up a cloudless blue vault, promising another breathlessly hot summer day in southern Arizona.

Leo Cardiff was still questioning witnesses as the coroner's crew arrived. Did anyone know the victim? No, they all said, but they remembered him. The newly departed made quite an impression in the little store. He demanded a lot of food in a hurry, intimidated employees, and complained mightily about the quality of service he was given. "He was a big guy, you know," the night manager explained. "He liked to throw his weight around. Wanted us to know how mean and tough he was. When he left, the guy behind the food counter was so upset he had to go home." That employee's name, the night manager said, was Pauley Abbott. He'd been working at the store for about three months.

"They come and they go, you know," the man said. "We have a lot of turnover, especially with the night crew. Pauley is a keeper, though. Bad scars, doesn't talk much. I hope what happened didn't scare him off."

Cardiff turned to Hector Medina, his partner, who was just leaving the store. "We're going to have to find this guy Abbott," he said.

Medina nodded. "I talked to the guy at the cash register. Nobody knows where he lives. He said Abbott walks to work, though. Can't be too far away."

The detectives made an odd couple. Medina was big, well over six feet tall, and heavy. He moved like a bear, but that was deceptive. He could be very quick

when the need arose. Cardiff was his opposite in many ways. Slight and pale, his wispy blonde hair was almost transparent, his blue eyes large and round. They seemed capable of taking in anything that happened within his field of vision. Both were superb investigators. Together, they were among the most effective teams in Pima County's Sheriff's Department. Side by side, they walked around the store to the victim's body. Crime scene technicians were already at work there.

The corpse lay perpendicular to his ride, face up, arms spread wide with the palms of his hands up—as though in exultation. He had been large and strong. Bulky muscles curled around his outstretched arms and corded his neck. Even in repose, his face was cruel. The sunken cheeks were lightly bearded, a broken nose was set above a brutally downturned mouth. Hooded eyes and a low forehead completed the visage of an angry man. All that he might have been was now past. His neck was slashed from ear to ear.

“Took a big knife to do that,” Medina said. “Maybe a machete.”

The tech kneeling by the body looked up, nodded. “A big knife and a strong man,” he said. “Looks like he grabbed the guy by his hair, and cut across the throat with one move. The victim didn't have time to fight. He was bleeding out by the time he hit the ground.”

“We have any I.D. yet?” Cardiff asked.

“The victim's name was Ralph Tanner,” said the tech. “According to his driver's license, he lived on the west side, a long way from here.”

“Could be gang-related,” Cardiff mused.

“Or a woman, or drugs,” said Medina, shaking his head. “There's no telling. Unless we find this Abbott, and he can tell us something, this one is going to the file cabinet.”

Advances in forensics, enormously improved fingerprint and DNA databases, crime mapping technology, and other technical breakthroughs help police unravel crimes today that would have remained unsolved mysteries in even the recent past. Progress in the conduct of interrogations has helped as well. Still, homicide investigations remain tedious, sand-sifting struggles to find truth. Unless enough clues are discovered, unless relationships with victims are found, all the efforts of well trained, motivated investigators may not be enough. Medina and

Cardiff would use all the resources within their grasp to find Tanner's murderer. Even so, as time passed, other matters would have to be dealt with, and his file would migrate to the back of their workload. Not all murders are solved. In southern Arizona over the past decade, one in every four remains open.

Half a Mile Away

The Captain let Pauley sleep. They'd have to leave, of course. The police would be coming, even now. Still, there was no reason to hurry, not yet. He'd wake his friend at around nine. Packing wouldn't take long. They could take city transit to the bus stop. Between their jobs, they'd saved enough that they wouldn't have to hitchhike out of this town. He grabbed the map beside his bed, unfolded it. *East or north*, he asked himself. *North*, he finally decided. *Maybe Utah*. He heard a noise, a moan. He knew his friend's nightmares would soon end his rest.

In the dark quiet of the small converted garage, Pauley's sleep was far from restful. He was retracing a mental journey through some of his worst dreams. They bothered him most after something bad had happened, but he had them often. Even though these same dreams had plagued his unconscious for more than a decade, Pauley still dreaded and feared them as much as he had when they first assaulted his mind. Here came one of them now, coalescing behind his eyes.

As he always did, he stood on a balcony, by a low wall, at the top of a stairway. Before him, across a courtyard, stood a magnificent castle-like structure—parapets, enormous arched windows, and turrets glistening in the slowly setting sun. He was in a scene out of the renaissance and dressed accordingly: a cape flowed from his shoulders, and low boots covered his feet. He carried a heavy cane, or had ... where was it? He looked around, perplexed. Somehow, the cane was gone. It had to be found. He began to retrace his steps: down the stairs, then across the courtyard past the fountain. There he stopped. Something else was missing now—his cape! Less calm now he looked around the courtyard, silent and still as ever. He rushed back toward the stairs he had just descended, began to mount them—and looked down to see that one of his boots was now gone as well.

As Pauley darted around the empty courtyard, more clothing vanished. Finally, he found himself cowering under a massive archway with no clothes at all.

Now he heard movement, almost a sigh of wind. Someone, something was coming. As it turned the corner, he saw all the clothes he now lacked, now worn by—something, someone he could never quite see. As it confronted him, he knew that every atom of him would soon be gone as well. There would be nothing left. He opened his mouth to scream ...

... and found himself in a burning room. Everything in the room was on fire, including Pauley himself. He crawled along the floor, trying to find air to breathe in the inferno as he searched for a way to escape it. As he crawled, he bumped into objects. They could not be identified, except as masses of flame. He screamed and moaned as he pushed himself along the smoldering floor. One side of him was already seared numb from the effort. He thought he saw an opening, a place not yet burning, and forced himself to move toward it through the incredible pain he felt. Yes! It was there, right before him now. He gathered last resources to flee the fire, but as he did something grabbed his legs. Something was pulling him back into the inferno. Mewling and gibbering, he cast about for something to hold, anything to resist the steady pressure that was sliding him back into the terrible burning place. He looked back, to see who or what was doing this terrible act and saw himself, glowing, incandescent, laughing. He cried out ... and awoke, still screaming.

The Captain handed him a cold, damp washcloth. “Time to get up, Pauley,” he said gently. “We’re going to have to get moving.”

Two Weeks Later

Cardiff and Medina sat with their lieutenant, going over case load. The clock on the wall said a little after nine a.m. The temperature outside was already touching eighty. It was going to be another scorcher.

“What about the Tanner murder?” the lieutenant asked, thumbing through the file. It was one of many on his desk.

The two detectives looked at each other. “We got nothing,” Medina finally said.

“He’s got no family we can find,” Cardiff explained. “His place is a little rathole off Shannon. Nothing there but dirty clothes and empty beer bottles. No gang or drug activity on record. Worked as a bouncer at a local bar. No friends who

want to admit it. Born in San Diego. Drifted here with the wind a few years ago. That's about it for Mr. Tanner.”

“We thought we had a lead on the cook, Abbott,” Medina continued. “We checked with Tucson Electric Power. They gave us an address—about half a mile from the convenience store, it turns out. Empty when we got there. Landlord says he hasn't seen Abbott or his buddy for several days. We did get some prints, though.”

“Abbott had a buddy?” the lieutenant asked.

“Apparently so,” said Cardiff. “At least, somebody who shared the rent. No I.D. on him, either. So far, we've come up bone dry. One clue left to look into. The murder weapon was nothing we've seen before. A very particular kind of knife. Coroner couldn't identify it, so we sent photos of the wounds to the Southern Regional Crime Lab. They say it's a Ka-Bar.”

“That the one the Marines get?”

“Yep. It's got a blade shape that makes it unique. There's got to be thousands of them around, but they are issued to the Marines. Maybe Abbott was in the Corps.”

“Seems worth checking.”

“It's all we've got, right now,” Medina said. “Looks like Abbott has left town.”

The lieutenant nodded. “You guys have plenty more caseload,” he said. “Pass this file to Sarah Won't. See if she can match it to crimes in other jurisdictions. Get on with the rest of your work.”

During her five years with the Pima County Sheriff's Department, computer technician Sarah Wontioski had become a legend. Petite and well proportioned, she wore her long raven hair in a series of complicated buns. Her glasses did not hide her big blue eyes, nor the freckles that dusted her nose and cheeks. Sarah was drop dead beautiful, the amorous target of scores of deputies, all trying mightily to win her favors. Sarah enjoyed their company, danced and dated, and even accepted a fervent kiss from time to time—but nothing more. Hence the nickname she carried with pride: Sarah Won't.

Sarah's work fascinated her, though many might have found it boring. She searched databases from police departments, state and federal agencies across the country, looking for other crimes committed by people in Pima County custody, or for crimes reported in other places similar to those done locally. Crime rates were rising. The nation's population aged and yearned for warmer climates as they did. When northerners moved south and west, they brought their predators, parasites, and scavengers along. In earlier days, before computers had described the nation, trails of crime would often fall away, remembered and recorded only in the places where they had been perpetrated—like insects frozen in amber. Sarah's job was to discover those trails. She was very good at it.

After studying the Tanner file, she began scanning the nation's electronic law enforcement records for similar crimes—assaults and murders committed by drifters, no robbery or sexual assault involved, using a large or Ka-Bar knife. Her primary tool was NIBRS, the national incident-based crime report database. She also scanned the Crime Data Explorer, which holds records from almost half of the nation's police forces, sixteen thousand agencies in all. Between these two, Sarah found more than a thousand records from the past decade that might relate to the murder just committed in Tucson.

She checked further, gathering additional local information about the descriptions in the records that looked promising from the agencies that had reported them. She eliminated perpetrators who were currently incarcerated or who had died, which narrowed the search to less than two hundred possibilities. These Sarah examined individually, looking for parallels between each and the Tanner murder—or details that would remove any from consideration. The process was grueling and time-consuming. Without her knowledge of computers and data management, it would have been impossible.

Finally, after almost a week's work, a pattern began to emerge from the enormous collection of information Sarah had sifted. A description began to coalesce. The combined data depicted a badly-scarred man, sometimes with an accomplice, who had crisscrossed the nation for the past decade. He took menial jobs, often in food service, and called himself "Pauley," or "Paddy." He was wanted for questioning in conjunction with four still-unsolved murders, all of which occurred near places where he was working at the time. In every case, the man had vanished before authorities could question him. The victims were always

men. None of them were robbed. The weapon was always some kind of large knife, specifically described on two occasions as a Ka-Bar. Pleased with her work, Sarah Won't presented the information she'd found to Medina and Cardiff.

"You did a great job, as usual, Sarah," Medina told her. "Looks like our pal Pauley has a lot of people looking for him."

"Look at this," Cardiff said, pointing to the file. "Aberdeen, South Dakota; Elko, Nevada; Clovis, New Mexico; El Paso, Texas. This guy gets around."

Sarah nodded, beaming.

"Yeah, and now here," Medina said, shaking his head. "Only trouble is, it means this one's not local. Not anymore. We're going to have to call in the Feds. I'll go tell the lieutenant."