

## 1

**Ajo, Arizona**

ANDI LEFT BEFORE sunrise, the desert sky just catching dawn fire, making the three-hundred-mile round trip to Tucson in one day, and now sits on an old Phelps Dodge mine road east of New Cornelia, watching the road behind her swim in watery late afternoon light.

Cloudless sky above. Bright infinite blue beyond.

*Empty.*

She doesn't always go to Tucson, sometimes Gila Bend instead. That's only about ninety miles round trip, give or take—far shorter—but Gila Bend feels so much smaller too, leaving *her* feeling so much more visible, traceable, exposed. Her friend Stephen heads south of the border for supplies every now and then, but despite the two years she's holed up in New Cornelia, Andi still isn't comfortable making that crossing.

Stephen once said it's possible their whole little wayward community is already south of the border, but no one in New Cornelia has ever bothered to check a map—certainly not Bella or the others who've been here for a decade or more—and no one who might care about such legal or official things has ever come out to a look. Out here, the sun and the mountains and the low desert constantly blur the horizon, erasing all kinds of lines, hazing away every boundary.

The reason you hide out in the Sonoran Desert on the farthest edge of Arizona within the shadows of the Little Ajo Mountains and the Organ Pipe National Monument and the Tohono O'odham Nation Reservation is because it's the sort of place people don't come looking for anything.

Not only do the other New Cornelia residents almost never make the trek to Tucson or Gila Bend anymore, most also won't even hazard the much shorter trips to the rez or Ajo. True, there are only a couple of shops on the rez, mostly just a dusty, desperate casino next to a gas station off Highway Mile Marker 55. And Ajo is little more than one Circle K, an Olsen's Market, and old mine company housing that's been scooped up by snowbirds and retirees fleeing California. But even that's too much contact for some, allowing Andi to earn her keep in New Cornelia—and a few spare dollars as well—by running into the city for those things that can't be otherwise delivered or traded for.

Ajo does get its surprising share of visitors, artist types drawn to its raw, rugged, desert beauty and unique history; the grandly named Sonoran Desert Inn and Conference Center, built out of the bones of an old school; and the abandoned open pit copper mine that gave rise to the town.

Native Americans were digging hematite out of the low mountains circling Ajo for hundreds of years before Spanish explorers arrived on horseback. Ajo copper was once transported by ox cart across the desert, loaded up on steamers in San Diego, sent as far away as Wales. The veins were exploited in one way or another almost constantly—with varying degrees of success—for decades, and the land still bears the scars of those endless efforts and operations, all those dashed hopes and dreams, now just meaningless roads and crushed rock and rusting equipment.

The open tailings pit is a raw wound in the earth more than a mile across, more than a thousand feet deep, bottomed out by a bright blue pool of chloride water. To Andi, it looks like a great, glaring eye, staring up from below.

Watching, judging, waiting.

Once the mine shut down for good and most of the land and equipment was sold off, a company came in and put in a solar

farm—21,000 photovoltaic panels—following the desert contours on the flanks of the pit. Andi has a clear view of them from her and Ruby's old single-wide trailer, and although the dark panels are designed to capture light, not reflect it, she still likes to imagine she can trace the sun's rise and fall across sky in all that shiny, black silicon.

Those panels don't keep the rain away; even the barren Sonoran desert gets some hellacious storms now and then. That's why she keeps the bright yellow StrikeAlert HD detector close on the carabiner at her hip, and another much larger one back at the trailer. But she still finds comfort in the thought of all that sunlight and heat held so close, so tight, like a closed fist. Like holding daylight, like holding summer, in your hand.

She checks the time on her cellphone, knowing Bella is already anxiously waiting for her. Visiting Bella is always a process—a lengthy, complicated, miserable process for both of them—after Andi's been to the city. But Bella bears it because of the Biscoff cookies packed in the cooler in Andi's backseat.

Andi bears it because she doesn't trust anyone else to look after Ruby.

Andi checks the time again, then the cracked digital on the truck's dash, still set for Central time. Neither her burner cell nor the dash clock are the same, or right, not even within an hour of each other. But she long got accustomed to doing this sort of math in her head, on the fly. She's been parked here for a good twenty minutes—and it's still twenty minutes more to New Cornelia's first trailer—with no sign of a car behind her.

Out here, with all the long sight lines and empty scrub, that's usually enough.

The old F-150's AC gave out last year, so she has the windows rolled down, a bare breath of breeze moving through the cab. The wind isn't doing much to cool her, but she's fine with it. She's gotten used to the constant calefaction, even loves it in a way—that perfect, blue, cloudless sky, marred only by the occasional circling turkey buzzard. Ajo gets about eight inches of rain a year, with three hundred sunny days. Temperatures soar well past one hundred in the summer,

a parched heat so unforgiving that it sucks all the moisture out of the air, turns the sweat on your skin to salt and dries the tears in your eyes before they have a chance to fall.

Incalescence so immense and powerful it's like a great, fiery hand squeezing your lungs and heart.

Waylen likes to joke that your oven is a dry heat too, and you sure in hell don't want to live inside there. But for all his complaining, he doesn't leave. Not Bella or Stephen either, or Erwin and Leah or any of the others. None of them. *Not me*, Andi thinks. For many of those who've made their way to New Cornelia, there's nowhere left to go.

Andi plays with the pendant at her neck, a jagged pearlescent mineral that holds a greenish glow, a deep spark, deep within.

She, too, knows it's nearly impossible to outrun every storm, every cloud in the sky. But she keeps trying, and all the way *out here* . . . at the edge of the goddamn world . . . is close as she's ever come.

Finally satisfied that the road's still clear, she slips the heavy, loaded Smith & Wesson she's been holding in her lap back beneath her seat and aims the truck toward home.