

Desert City Diva

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To Maria, for the roads we've travelled,
and the solitudes shared.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ONE

The Bite

It was a bad idea to go out for Mexican food at 2:30 in the morning, but that hadn't prevented Rolly Waters from stopping by the Villa Cantina for a plate of machaca after his gig. It wasn't the machaca that was going to kill him, though. It was the bite on his leg. It was a whole string of bad ideas that had brought him to this wretched state, on the nauseous edge of mortality. Bad ideas, bad decisions, bad choices – whatever you wanted to call them – each one had inexorably led to the next. And each had led to this moment, as he barfed his guts out in the emergency room at the hospital. He didn't even know the name of the hospital. He didn't know the name of the town it was in. He only knew that he'd never felt this sick. He knew he was going to die.

Medical personnel dressed in grubby green scrubs gathered around him, thwarting his passage into oblivion, perhaps hastening it. One of them jabbed his left arm with a needle. Another wrapped his right arm in a blood pressure cuff. They pulled his pants off and inspected his ankle as the vital signs monitor beeped in his ear. His left leg felt like burning coals had been inserted under his skin. A woman made him swallow two pills. She gave him a shot glass of liquid that smelled like rotten eggs. Stomach acid swirled up in his throat. The doctors and nurses floated on a bilious green cloud. He lifted his head and leaned over the bucket. His stomach heaved but nothing came up. He closed his eyes and lay back on the bed. The air smelled like old fish. He surrendered to the vivid manifestations of an unsettled sleep.

Poisson. It was the French word for fish. One letter different from poison. There were no fish in the desert. There was no water. The aliens drank gold

in their water. The people drank poison. The people couldn't breathe. They gasped for air like fish in the living room.

He opened his eyes. The harsh light of the emergency room glowed with a creeping softness. A nurse came by and gave him two more pills. He laughed. Valium always made him loopy like this. If he was going to die, he would be defiant in death, laughing his way into the great darkness. There were worse ways to go. He would die laughing, with a smile on his face. Out of his mind. Definitely Valium. Over and out.

The man had a gift for him. The man was a bird. The bird sang a song. The song had gold notes. The girl had gold eyes.

He awoke. There was no one around. He watched with dull fascination as the blood pressure cuff on his right arm inflated again. It was going to blow up in his face. As it was about to crush his arm into fractured bits of bone gravel, the cuff exhaled and collapsed. He turned his head on the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. The tiles in the ceiling were damaged. Crumpled and stained. His left leg still burned, but less so than before. His stomach seemed steadier.

A nurse appeared next to him, acting like she wanted to take his temperature. He opened his mouth and took the plastic tip under his tongue. She checked the number, nodded and removed the thermometer.

"Coming down," she said. She looked at the display on the blood pressure monitor. "Blood pressure's down too."

"I'm not gun' die?" Rolly said, nodding his head in affirmation.

"No. Doesn't look like you're going to die today," the nurse said. She smiled at him. "Of course, we'll need the doctor to confirm that. He's the one that gets to decide."

The nurse was cute. Real cute. Macy Starr was cute, too. In a different way.

"How's your leg feeling?" the nurse asked.

"Bedder," said Rolly. His mouth felt like it had been blasted with fine sand.

"Good. I'll check back in a little bit. It's going to be a couple more hours, to make sure you get down to normal."

"Where am I?"

"Brawley General Hospital. Do you remember checking in?"

“I remember driving in a rocket ship. There were some blue lights. It smelled like fish.”

“That’s Brawley, all right. It’s the fertilizer that smells. I don’t know what the rocket ship part’s about.”

“Something bit me.”

“A black widow spider. Probably not a good idea to go tramping around barefoot in Slab City like your friends said you were doing.”

“My friends? Are they here?”

“I can check if you want. Do you feel ready to see people?”

“In a little while,” Rolly said, feeling sleepy again. The nurse left, closed the curtains. He lay back on the pillow.

He was sitting in a rowboat on a sandy hill. His father was there. They were in the same boat. His father shouted at him, giving orders. His father handed him a ukulele. He said there was a bomb in the boat. His father saluted, then jumped out of the boat and swam away.

Rolly opened his eyes. He remembered where he was. The Brawley General emergency ward was quieter now, last night’s hubbub reduced to a muted hum. He wondered if the staff had forgotten about him and closed the place down, gone to lunch, or breakfast, or whatever meal it was time for.

The monitoring equipment they’d hooked him up to continued to beep at regular intervals, but it seemed less alarming now. The swelling in his leg had gone down, along with the pain. He felt almost normal. He felt ready to check out. That didn’t count for much. He knew how it went in the emergency ward. Like Zeno’s arrow, each minute got longer the closer you got to being discharged. He lay back on the bed, stared at the crumpled, stained tiles in the ceiling.

Three days ago, he’d gone out for Mexican food at 2:30 in the morning. That’s when he’d met Macy Starr, at the Villa Cantina. If he’d gone home right after his gig, or just gone to the grocery store, he would never have taken her case. He wouldn’t be lying in the hospital in the rotten fish city of Brawley with a black widow spider bite on his ankle. Things would get complicated with Macy now, accounting his hours, parsing them into the personal and the professional. Last night they’d had sex in the Tioga. The spider bite was a message. The message said he was an idiot.

Macy Starr had golden eyes.

TWO

The DJ

Macy Starr had golden eyes. She had strawberry-blond hair. It hung down in dreadlocks that surrounded her tan, freckled face like a halo of soggy breadsticks. At this moment, she was drenched in sweat, the kind of sweat that pours off your body when you work a room with bright spotlights and poor ventilation. It was nightclub sweat, an affidavit of her vocation, and Rolly's, the sweat that blooms off the bodies of musicians, strippers and stand-up comedians. No amount of antiperspirant or hygienic preparation would hold it back.

Macy was a dance club DJ, cranking out beats until the early hours of morning. She'd just finished her gig at the club adjoining the Villa Cantina restaurant in downtown San Diego. Rolly had stopped in at the cantina after his own gig that night, bending guitar strings at Patrick's Pub six blocks away. Under normal conditions, an old-school guitar player like himself and a young beatmaker like Macy would have little to say to each other. They would not have crossed paths. Vera, the hostess, had introduced them. Macy needed help. She needed advice, the kind only a guitar-playing private detective could provide.

Macy had tattoos all over her thin muscular arms – geometric marks and mythical creatures, symbols of something. Rolly had no idea what. She was a small woman with the nervous energy of a flycatcher. Her eyes were amazing. They sparkled with bright flecks of gold that seemed to illuminate the dim light of the back corner booth. A bead of sweat dripped down Macy's neck and fell into her lovely jugular notch. She was at least twenty years younger than Rolly.

"Not much to look at down there," she said, interrupting his gaze.

"Your shirt is, uh . . . kind of unusual," said Rolly, raising his eyes from Macy's chest.

“You like Stoner Mickey?” she said, looking down at the front of her tank top, a rainbow-eyed Mickey Mouse wearing headphones and smoking a king-sized joint.

“I assume that’s not officially licensed?” said Rolly.

“It’s a one-off. I made it myself. Disney’s lawyers would tear this off my body in copyright-induced rage if they ever saw it. They’re hardcore about branding. That’s what I heard anyway. What do you think?”

“About Disney?”

“No, dumbass. About that guitar thing. You ever seen anything like it?”

The guitar thing in question wasn’t really a guitar. It was a one-stringed instrument propped up on the booth in between them. It was well made, with a finely finished wood body, a gold-plated tuning peg and a vintage single-coil pickup. You could make some noise with it, but it lacked the refinements and playability of a real guitar.

“I’d call it a diddley bow,” said Rolly.

“Diddley what?”

“Diddley bow. They started in the South. Sharecroppers would attach a piece of wood to their house, drive in a couple of nails and stretch a wire between them so they could thump on it. Kind of a poor man’s guitar. Homemade. Not usually this nice.”

“What about on the back?” said Macy.

Rolly grabbed the diddley bow and inspected the back. A photograph had been laminated on to it, a black-and-white photograph of a teenage girl and a young man in a baseball uniform. The man had his arm around the girl. Both of them were smiling. There were palm trees in the background. Their smiles looked genuine.

“You think this is your aunt?” Rolly said.

“I guess so. Daddy Joe called her Aunt Betty.”

“Who’s Daddy Joe?”

“I’ll get to that.”

“You don’t know Aunt Betty’s last name?”

“Not unless it was Harper. That’s Daddy Joe’s name.”

“And you think it was Daddy Joe that left this here for you?”

“Vera said the guy who left it was a big Indian.”

“The woman in this photo doesn’t look Indian.”

“Because she’s black?”

“Well, she does look more African-American than Indian, don’t you think?”

“You’re an expert on racial distinctions?”

“No. I just . . . Are you . . . Native American?”

“No. Not now that there’s money on the line.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing. I don’t care. I got out of that damn place. I don’t need their money.”

“What money?”

“They built a casino. If you’re part of the tribe, you get a share of the money.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. DNA.”

“You mean your genes? They check your DNA?”

Macy pointed at three letters tattooed between her jugular notch and her left breast.

“This DNA stands for Do Not Ask,” she said. “Get used to me saying it.”

Rolly nodded. “OK,” he said. “But I’m an investigator. I have to ask questions.”

“It’s my personal credo,” said Macy. “Do not ask. DNA. Just do what you want to do. But if I say DNA to you, that means I want you to shut up.”

“What about Daddy Joe?” Rolly said. “Can I ask you about him?”

Macy stared at Rolly for a moment. He stared back. She broke first.

“OK, just give me a second,” she said, looking away. “You can fantasize about what my little tits might look like or whatever else you want to think about this crazy bitch you just met. But don’t ask me anything else until I say it’s OK.”

Rolly nodded. He tried not to picture what enticements lay under Macy’s shirt, but it was like trying not to think about pink elephants once somebody had mentioned them. He scraped at his plate, but there was nothing left worth eating. The refried beans had gone cold. He looked around the room. The cantina was busy. Staying open after last call had been good for business. At three in the morning, it became a refuge for the after-hours crowd with no place to go, for the leftovers who needed

sustenance, a greasy ballast to diminish the hangovers they'd be nursing the next day.

"OK," said Macy. "I'm ready."

Rolly nodded. He liked Macy. He liked her directness.

"So here's the deal," she began. "I was adopted. I think. Nobody ever explained a damn thing to me and I never cared much, I guess. You could say I've got some parental issues, if you wanna go all Doctor Phil on me. Anyway, I grew up on the Jincona Indian reservation. It's out east, in BF Egypt."

"My band's playing at their casino tomorrow."

"Yeah, great, whatever. Daddy Joe Harper and his wife were the ones that took care of me, until Mama Joe died. Then Kinnie took care of me. She's Daddy Joe's real daughter. Kinnie never liked me much. I don't blame her. Aunt Betty was there, for a little while, when I was a baby. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I'd remember her if it wasn't for that picture there. Daddy Joe kept that diddley bow thing in his closet. He'd bring it out sometimes and tell me about Aunt Betty."

"What'd he say?" said Rolly.

"DNA."

"Sorry."

"No questions right now. Not while I'm trying to get through this."

Rolly nodded. Macy fingered the gold charm that hung from her neck. The charm was shaped like a tube. There was some sort of inscription on it.

"Anyway," Macy continued, "Daddy Joe always used to show me that photograph. He'd say "This is your Aunt Betty. She brought you to our house. She brought you here. We never want to forget her." He'd tell me that, and then one day I asked him, you know, "What happened to Aunt Betty? Where did she go?""

Macy paused. Rolly waited. DNA.

"He said she went to be with her friends," Macy said. "That her friends had all gone away, so she felt lonely and sad. He said she took a walk in the stars."

Rolly nodded again.

"Is it OK if I ask another question now?" he said.

"Yeah. I guess. If you can make anything out of all that."

"Do you know who your birth mother was?"

"I knew you were going to ask me that. Seems like the obvious thing, doesn't it?"

"That Aunt Betty's your mother?"

"Yeah."

"You think this baseball player might be your father?"

"That makes as much sense as you being my father. Less, even."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at me. I've got lighter skin than either of them, and freckles. This blonde, kinky hair? There's no coloring. It's my natural hair. I mean, it wouldn't make sense, heredity-wise, if they were both my parents, right?"

"Yeah. I guess. I don't really know how that stuff works."

"I did some reading. I'm a mutt, not a purebreed."

"We're all mutts, in one way or the other."

"What's your background?"

"Norwegian on my mom's side. My dad's more Scotch Irish."

"Yeah, well, some of us are more mutty than others," said Macy. She lifted her eyelids and stared at Rolly again. "You ever seen anybody with eyes like these?"

"No," said Rolly. "I can't say I have."

"Wolf Girl," she said. "That's what the kids on the rez used to call me. Because of my eyes. That and because I ran around in the hills by myself all the time."

Rolly considered several things he could say about Macy's eyes but none of them seemed appropriate; nothing a portly, fortyish man could say to a woman her age without sounding desperate or foolish. He resisted the temptation. The reservation kids had it right, though. There was something like wolf light in Macy's eyes, a fierceness in her that stirred something inside him. He needed to stop it from stirring. He needed to keep his professional pants on.

"When was the last time you saw Daddy Joe?"

"Five years ago."

"Have you talked to him?"

"Not since I left. We had some issues. We weren't really on speaking terms when I left."

"What happened?"

"Just the usual teenager stuff. I had to get out of that place. DNA."

“OK. You’re sure it was him, though, that brought the diddley bow tonight?”

“I’m just going on what Vera said. A big guy. Older. Looked Indian. Daddy Joe’s big, enough that you notice it. He used to be chief of tribal police.”

“Your Daddy Joe was a cop?”

“I wouldn’t call the tribals real cops.”

“You don’t get along with them, either?”

“DNA,” said Macy. “Anyway, it must be something important, this diddley bow thing. I don’t see Daddy Joe driving all the way down from the rez to give it to me otherwise.”

“Maybe you should call him tomorrow.”

“Can’t go there. Too complicated. How is it with your dad?”

“My dad?”

“Yeah. How well do you get along with your dad?”

Rolly smiled. “DNA,” he said.

Macy laughed. “That bad, huh, Waters?”

Rolly nodded.

“Yeah, I get it,” said Macy. “Thing is, I can’t figure out how Daddy Joe found me here. He’s retired. He just sits up there on the rez all the time, in his house, going over his old files.”

“Maybe he saw your name in the paper or something.”

Macy reached in her back pocket, pulled out a postcard-sized piece of paper and passed it to Rolly. “That’s my flyer,” she said. “I post those around town.”

“DJ Crazy Macy?” said Rolly, reading the flyer. It had a photo of Macy, her blonde dreadlocks spread around her head, backlit into a luminescent corona.

“That’s my stage name,” she said. “One of ‘em. Dubstep Blonde, Dizzy Gold Negra. It depends on what kind of mixes I’m playing. This weekend I’m Crazy Macy.”

Rolly resisted the impulse to make a smart remark. Macy looked like she expected one.

“You want to know about my necklace?” she said.

“Hmm?”

“You didn’t notice it, did you?”

“Sure I noticed. It’s gold, right?”

“Yeah, it’s twenty-four karat.”

“Uh, yeah. And?”

“It’s a tube. Looks like there’s an engraving.”

“You know, Vera told me you were this hot shit detective guy, but I’m starting to wonder if she’s smoked too many jalapeños.”

“It’s late and I’m tired. I’ll give you my card. We can talk tomorrow.”

“You still haven’t noticed? Look at the damn picture again.”

Rolly looked at the photo on the back of the diddley bow. He noticed this time. He looked back at Macy. “Aunt Betty’s got the same necklace, hasn’t she?”

“That’s what it looks like to me.”

Macy undid her choker. She passed it to Rolly. “Read it,” she said.

Rolly squinted his eyes. “Eight. three . . .”

“Eight, three, six, eight, nine, two, nine, five, four,” said Macy, completing the number for him.

“What does that mean?”

“No idea,” said Macy.

Rolly flipped the gold tube around to look at the other side.

“The same numbers are on both sides,” said Macy. “That’s all there is.”

“Maybe it’s a date?” he said.

“I thought that at first,” said Macy. “But it doesn’t make any sense as a date.”

Rolly tried several permutations of the number. He had to admit the date idea made no sense at all. It wasn’t a phone number; it was missing a digit.

“How long have you had this?” he asked.

“A little more than five years,” Macy said. “Daddy Joe said it was mine.”

“He gave this to you?”

“He said he was going to. When I was of age.”

“Does he know what the number means?”

“I guess he might.”

“Don’t you think you should ask him?”

“Like I said, me and Daddy Joe have some issues. He said he was going to give the necklace to me when I turned legal. Eighteen. He would have, I guess.”

“What’s that mean? You guess?”

“I left the rez before I turned eighteen. I ran away. I took the necklace.”

“You mean you stole it?”

“Yeah, that’s right, Waters. I stole it. I lived in the police chief’s house and I stole his twenty-four-karat gold necklace.”

THREE

The Hospital

Alicia Waters sat in the waiting room at Mercy Hospital wearing a rumpled green sweatsuit. Her blonde wig was askew. Long streaks of black mascara ran from her eyes. Her pretty pink face looked puffy and red. It was the first time Rolly had seen his mother-in-law looking less than impeccable. She was usually a chubby bundle of smiling enthusiasm and spotless cosmetics, always tidy, bright-eyed and more than presentable for a night out at the officer's club. But Alicia hadn't had time to pick out an outfit or touch up her makeup after her husband, Rolly's father, had collapsed in their driveway, turning blue and clutching his chest.

"It's that damn Tioga," she said, wiping her eyes.

"What's a Tioga?" said Rolly.

"He bought a mobile home. I never really liked the idea, but he got so excited about it. He even stopped drinking. Well, he was drinking less – you know, not like he does sometimes."

"I'm sure that was nice," said Rolly's real mother, Judith, who sat next to Alicia, providing Kleenex and sympathy. "Did you have a trip planned?"

"Oh, I couldn't keep up with it. He kept coming up with new places," said Alicia. "First it was a week, then a month." She shuddered. "I mean, can you imagine me spending two months cooped up in that hideous thing?"

"You were leaving soon?"

"Next week," said Alicia, dabbing at her eyes with the tissue Rolly's mother had provided.

"I guess that trip's off," said Rolly. His mother glared at him.

"I went along with it," said Alicia. "I mean, I thought it would be nice to go somewhere –perhaps a long weekend to try out the whole thing. One of those nice campgrounds where there's lots of people to meet. I thought that would be enough, that maybe he'd get over it. He kept saying he wanted to see the country, like it used to be. To get out in nature or something."

Alicia shuddered and blew her nose.

“Ugh,” she said, though it was unclear if she was referring to nature in general or the soggy tissue she clutched in her hand. Rolly’s mother handed her another Kleenex.

“What happened?” said Rolly.

“He was working on the damn thing this morning. Early. Changing the oil or something, I don’t know. He had these big wrenches. I went out to bring him some coffee. I knew something was wrong. His face was all purple. I made him sit down. I feel so guilty.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Rolly.

“He was trying to fix it up nice for me so I’d be happy. He knew I didn’t like it, the whole idea. We bought it used, you see. It needed some work. He spent a lot of time out there. It was too much for someone his age. I wish they’d tell us something.”

Rolly’s mother looked over at him. “Why don’t you check again, dear,” she said. “See if they’ve got any news.”

Rolly nodded. He turned and walked to the check-in station.

“Yes, sir,” said the clerk, without looking up. “Can I help you?”

“I wanted to know if there’s any news on my father. Dean Waters.”

“A doctor or nurse will come out to see you when he’s ready.”

“He had a heart attack.”

The clerk nodded. “Let me check his status,” she said. She tapped a few times on the computer, then looked up at Rolly.

“He’s still listed in resuscitation,” she said.

“What does that mean?”

“That’s the most recent entry. He may have been moved by now, but there’s no update.”

“When will we know something?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not able to tell you that, sir. A doctor or nurse will speak to you when they’re able to provide an update.”

“Thank you.” Rolly nodded. He walked back to his mother and Alicia.

“No news is good news, I guess,” he said. Alicia began crying again. Rolly’s mother shot him an exasperated glance.

“Rolly,” she said, “why don’t you see if you can find the cafeteria, maybe bring something back for the rest of us?”

“I couldn’t eat a thing,” said Alicia.

“Maybe some juice,” said Rolly’s mother. “You need to have something.”

Rolly’s mother shot another glance at him. He didn’t argue. He doubted they would know anything soon. An emergency room nurse he had dated told him the secret once. Take any time estimate given by the ER staff and multiply it by four. If someone said you’d be out in thirty minutes, it would be two hours. If they told you an hour, it would probably take four. It was the painstaking sluggishness at the heart of the beast. He’d been in enough emergency rooms to confirm it. He walked back to the check-in station. The clerk gave him directions to the cafeteria.

He went through the swinging doors and out of the ward, spotted an empty chair and slumped into it. His body felt heavy, weighed down with conflicted feelings. He hated his father for having a heart attack. He hated his father for being a drunk, for the way his father had treated his mother, but mostly he hated his father for being an arrogant son-of-a-bitch who was going to die without apologies. His father was an alcoholic bastard who’d never given Rolly anything, beyond a predilection for bottled spirits.

Rolly knew it was stupid to feel this way, like he’d been cheated. He was partly to blame. He’d kept his distance, never speaking his mind, reluctant to face his father straight on. Dean Waters had captained two naval warships, a wife and a son. He’d always been the man who gave orders, until the U.S. Navy demoted him and took away his command, until his wife and son abandoned their home. The old sailor had always worked too hard, too intensely. He’d always drunk too much, too, but he’d never learned to listen to anyone. He never cared what anyone said. Now he’d pressed his second wife into first-mate status for a landlocked cruise she never wanted to take, a low-rent re-enactment of his glory days on the high seas. Except this time they’d be making ports of call in a crummy old Tioga, docking in trailer parks.

Rolly rubbed his chest, confounded by the pain. His own heart would get him someday if he didn’t start eating better. Other vices hadn’t managed to do him in yet. Alcohol. Drugs. Angry husbands of women who didn’t wear wedding rings. Car accidents. All had come close. He stood up and stretched. He

wasn't dead yet. And neither was his father, as far as he knew. He walked down the hall and followed the signs.

The cafeteria was quiet when he arrived. The lunch hour had passed. He picked up an apple and a banana for his mother and a bottle of orange juice for Alicia. He paid the cashier, walked into the dining room and placed the tray with the large blueberry muffin and a cup of coffee he'd bought for himself on a table in the corner. He sat down and tried the muffin. It tasted like lemonized chemicals. The coffee hit his gut like pure acid. He finished both items anyway. He didn't want to go back to the emergency room.

He thought about Macy Starr, the woman he'd met the night before at the cantina. She'd agreed to let him borrow the diddley bow, the one-string guitar, so he could do some research. The diddley bow intrigued him, the quality of the work that had been put into something that was usually a rustic homemade instrument. He wanted to take it by Norwood's guitar shop if he got a chance, find out if Rob had seen one like it, if he could tell him anything about it.

He hadn't mentioned it to Macy, but he'd recognized the baseball player in the photograph laminated onto the back. He'd never seen the player in a minor-league uniform before, so he needed to be sure. He pulled his phone out of his pocket, searched through the directory and tapped on a name. There was a picture on the wall, drawn with crayons, of a hospital building with flowers and stick-figure children dancing around it.

"Hey," said Max Gemeinhardt, answering the phone.

"Hey," said Rolly. "I've got a trivia question for you. Baseball. The hometown team."

"Shoot," said Max. Max was a baseball encyclopedia. You couldn't stump him.

"Eric Ozzie," said Rolly. "Did he play in the minors?"

"Of course he did. Wenfield's the only local guy who skipped the minors. Well, there was Naly and the first Dale Roberts, but neither of them stayed around long. And they both got sent down at some point."

"Where'd he play? Ozzie, I mean. Did he ever suit up for a team called the Coconuts?"

"Sure. Hawaii. That was our Triple-A team back then. They're gone now. Why'd you want to know?"

“I’ve got a photo of him, in his Coconuts uniform. I think it’s him, anyway.”

“Well, if it looks like him it probably is.”

“He looks pretty young.”

“Just out of high school, I imagine. He got called up halfway through his second year.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Geez, let me think. Not so good with dates anymore. I guess it’d be about twenty years ago, give or take.”

“The Sneaker.”

“He hates that nickname, you know.”

“Yeah. I’m sure that’s why he based his whole business model around it.”

“The man’s not stupid. The branding was there. So what’s this photo you’ve got?”

“A client gave it to me. She’s trying to identify a girl who’s standing next to him. Ozzie’s in his baseball uniform, with his arm around the girl. It looks like it’s after a game or something. My client doesn’t know that it’s him.”

“How old is the girl in the photograph?”

“I don’t know. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen.”

“You didn’t tell your client it was Ozzie?”

“No.”

“You want to talk to him?”

“Well, it seems like that might be the easiest way to find out who the girl is.”

“If he remembers.”

“Yeah. If he remembers.”

“That’s a long time ago.”

“My client says she was adopted.”

“This isn’t some kind of paternity thing, is it?”

“My client’s about the right age, but I don’t think so. She seems more interested in the girl who’s with Ozzie. She says it’s her aunt but it might be her mother. That’s what she’s trying to find out.”

“Sounds a little squeegee to me.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell her who he was. I wanted to be sure.”

“You did the right thing. You want me to call him?”

“Hmm?”

“I did some legal work for Ozzie a few years back. It was a medical thing. That quack doctor who prescribed the painkillers for him. We settled with the insurance guys, out of court.”

“So Ozzie owes you one?”

“Not really. I got my share of the money. It was a pretty good settlement, though. Helped him finance that first restaurant. He’ll take a call from me.”

“Well,” said Rolly, “if I try to call him I’ll have to go through the front office and leave a dozen messages before he calls me back. You know how that is.”

“Let me call him. I’ll get back to you.”

“Thanks.”

“Glad to do it. How’s your mom?”

“She’s OK.”

“Something wrong?”

Rolly looked at the picture on the wall again. Children and flowers – simple shapes drawn in crayon colors.

“I’m at the hospital. My dad had a heart attack.”

“Oh, man, sorry to hear that.”

“We’re all here. At Mercy. Mom and Alicia and me. In the ER.”

Max didn’t say anything for a moment. Neither did Rolly.

“Well,” said Max, “I’d offer to come down, but it sounds like you got enough on your hands.”

“Yeah. Alicia’s a mess. Mom’s getting agitated.”

“And you’re in the middle. As usual. You gonna be OK?”

“I don’t know. It’s mostly just weird right now. I guess I’m OK.”

“Well, I hope your dad pulls through. Give me a call if you need anything. I can find a way to distract your mother if you need some time to yourself.”

“Yeah. Call me if you hear something from Ozzie.”

“I will. Talk to you later.”

Rolly hung up and checked the time on his phone. Moogus was picking him up around five. They were carpooling to tonight’s gig, at the Jincona Reservation casino where Macy grew up. It was a longer drive than usual, through the winding roads of the east county mountains. He put the phone back in his pocket. He had hoped to get down to Norwood’s today with the diddley bow. Depending on how things went with his father, he

might still have a couple of hours. He picked up the apple, the banana and the bottle of orange juice, and headed back to the emergency ward.