

(*West Texas, 1963*)

There is a clarity that comes with crossing the desert and while it would take me years to get the whole picture, the more I thought about it, the more I started to see what I had missed. Something had been a long time rotting in my L.A. paradise and as the weather-man warned, the smog was most lethal when you could not see it. Even on those bad-air days that burned your eyes and made you squint, you didn't worry about the brown haze that hugged the freeways and put snot in your lungs because you knew the winds would shift and the wonderful life would come back into focus, for there was Hollywood, on its perch beneath a cleared blue sky, promising a new happy ending. The desert was much too stark and straightforward; no smog, no stench, no traffic. It was clearly no place for people.

My father had not turned on the air-conditioning even though the sun was already charring our Valiant like toast. As I watched him hunkered at the wheel trying to keep up with the Angells, my mother silent beside him in a sleeveless blue dress, her shining black hair half-hidden in a turquoise silk scarf, I knew I had a lot left to learn, so I did not cringe when the same pleading song came twanging from the radio. After one-hundred-degree miles of nothing but creosote and yucca rushing past our windows I reckoned our brains were too dulled for meaningful conversation. That didn't mean my father hated country music any less.

"You could at least tune in another station," he grumbled, his eyes locked on the endless open road.

"There *are* no other stations. You didn't want to spend the money and get FM like I asked you to, remember? It's Vinton or Skeeter. Your choice."

"You call that a choice? How about plain silence?"

"I'm not going to sit here bored stiff—I already did three puzzles. Anyway, I like this song."

"Fine," my father spat, "corrupt the boy's ears."

Uh-oh, here we go, I thought wearily—time to play 'persecuted child in the middle.' Of late, no matter the contention, I was the shuttlecock to be whacked back and forth until the server felt confident they had shown the greater concern for my well being. I was not dumb enough to expose the one I was rooting for, but I cheered inside hearing my mother score first.

"So now you're concerned about his talent."

"What are you talking about? I've always wanted him to develop all of his abilities."

"Forgive me—I thought *I* was the one who paid for his music lessons."

"Let's just drop it."

My mother huffed in victory. "I bet you don't want to talk about it."

And so it went, back and forth, off and on, with aching hearts weeping from the radio, over and over, past Canutillo, El Paso and Socorro.