

"If a label is required, say I am one
who loves the unfenced country."

— Edward Abbey
Desert Solitaire

1

Fifteen minutes before the shooting started, Jamey was as far away from it as anyone could get, unshakable in his faith that this was the best day of his life. After three more days, Saturday? Even better. And after that, fifty or sixty years of escalating bliss sounded about right. Unrealistic? Bite your tongue. He'd banished the word from his vocabulary long ago.

Jamey had crossed the state line almost an hour ago, and on the other side of the windshield Arizona was starting to look the way he thought Arizona should. There was something barren and sterile about the east deserts of Southern California. But Arizona seemed to wake up and shrug off the lifelessness of its neighbor, with red rocks and saguaro cactuses that looked as though they had been standing since the dawn of time.

Around the next bend, the ugliest colors he'd seen since leaving L.A. glared like a festering sore, "Gulp 'n' Go" shrieking in radioactive letters from the sign towering over the two-lane blacktop. With the fuel gauge nearing E, he had no choice but to steer for it, this palace of gasoline and lottery tickets, where microwave burritos went to die.

He stopped alongside the pumps and paced across the lot. The only other car here, parked near the entrance, was a county sheriff's cruiser. Jamey opened the glass door and a bubble of cool air swelled out, sucked him the rest of the way inside.

The deputy chatting up the kid at the counter swiveled at the hips to give Jamey an up-and-down inspection. It felt like a move the man would look for any excuse to make, in uniform or not. Swing that big authoritative gut around like the prow of a

ship, then stare down everything in his path.

No. Not his path. His *sights* — that's how he would see the world. Little crosshairs etched onto his corneas.

Jamey nodded once and veered toward the beverage coolers.

He studied people, Jamey did. Their stances, their faces, their moves. Tried to crawl into their thoughts and come up with what they wanted, or feared. Standard Stanislavsky workshop cliché, *What's my motivation?*, but really, you had to make a habit of cataloging the people you encountered. Never know when the phone's going to ring and there's your agent. Could you play an Arizona deputy? You bet, Sherry, I thought you'd never ask. Just get Makeup to give me thirty more years and another seventy pounds, and have I ever got just the guy for you.

Although the way his career had been going, he felt more likely to get a call to play the Gulp 'n' Go clerk. Shot dead in a stick-up on page two of the script. More time spent having the blood squib rigged onto the back of his head than learning dialogue, because there isn't any. Roll credits, at the bottom of the list: *Nameless Victim #1: Jamey Sheppard*. His only hope is to be credited in order of appearance.

By the time he set his caffeine of choice on the counter, the deputy had left, back out into the September heat, so he studied the clerk instead. A tall kid, scraggly red hair and an Adam's apple like a golf ball socketed into the middle of his throat. Twenty or so, stubborn teenage-era zits clustered on his cheeks. Short-sleeve uniform shirt garish enough to match the sign outside, and a crooked nametag: *Robbie*.

Something more, though; something less apparent: A cheap electric guitar and amplifier in a corner of his two-room apartment. It's never once been tuned, let alone played, properly. Because he's tone deaf. But he tries. Valiantly he tries. Oh, the neighbors love him.

Robbie scanned the two bottles of Starbucks mocha into the register, then froze, doing some studying of his own.

"This is too weird," he said. "It's like all of a sudden I'm getting this flash of you drinking Mountain Dew, instead. I mean totally powering it down."

"Do you watch much TV?"

"Like I got much else to do around here?"

"I was in a Mountain Dew commercial last year. It's still running, I think."

"No way!" Robbie's eyes went full-bore. "Who'd you play?"

"It's not like the guy had a name. 'Radical Dude Number Three' was what they called him. It was just one of those spots where all you do is look high-energy and yell a lot."

A gleam began to kindle in Robbie's eyes, as though he'd just found a more highly evolved calling. "I could do that. No problem."

Jamey gave him an encouraging nod. "Stranger things have happened."

"And I guess you get plenty product to drink, too?"

"Until you're ready to pee green."

"Awesome," Robbie said. "Anything else, or will that do it for you?"

"Give me ten dollars' worth on pump two out there."

They settled up, Jamey light enough on cash that he put it on his MasterCard. He watched Robbie start chewing at his lower lip, abruptly as nervous as if he were fifteen and asking a girl out for the first time. Someone way beyond his reach but he's naive enough to believe he might actually pull it off. And onscreen, he would, the audience rooting for him, empathetic as they learn their lesson: It's what's inside that counts. Which they forget the instant they hit the lobby and the first butt-ugly klutz gets in their way.

Robbie slid a napkin and pen across the counter. "Could I get your autograph?"

How many times had he signed his name like this — six? Eight? Few enough to count on two hands. A pity it wasn't for anything more substantial than hawking green sugared water, but recognition was recognition.

"Robbie," he said, "I would be honored." Pondering his responsibility a moment, knowing it had to be something memorable. Then he had it:

To Robbie,

Try using an electronic tuner on your guitar for a change.

He signed his name with a flourish, and below it:

"Radical Dude #3"

Jamey pushed the napkin across the counter, Robbie calling out "Hey, thanks!" at Jamey's back, "I'll give that a try, thanks!" The heavy glass door banged shut after his into-the-sunset wave.

Back at his car, he'd just flipped the gas panel open when the deputy appeared at his side, out of nowhere. Afternoon sun slanting in from behind, he was a solar eclipse in a flat-brimmed hat. Jamey squinted at him, nerves twanging at the gun and badge and uniform with half-moon sweat rings beneath the arms. Trying to remember every wrong thing he'd ever done.

"How about showing me some ID and registration," the deputy said.

Wallet first. Jamey slid his license from the sleeve and handed it over. "The registration, that's probably in the glove compartment."

"Probably.' You're just not sure." One eyebrow nudged upward to crinkle his red forehead. Big fist, creased with pale scars, dropping to rest casually atop the butt of his revolver, holstered but with the strap unsnapped. He twiddled at it with a thick finger. "Let's find out, then. And when your hand comes out of that box...? All I better see is paper."

Jamey brought out the form, hands slow and in plain view, nothing to hide. This man was bored or needed to meet a quota or he simply didn't like people from across a border, *any* border, and California's would do just as well as Mexico's when the mood was on him.

The deputy made a show of checking the license against the registration, how

they failed to match. "I'll allow you this much, at least — you look more like a Jamey than a Samantha. But they're both kind of effeminate names, if you ask me."

Jamey nodded. "That's the way my brother Susan feels about it, too."

The deputy's seamed cheeks turned blotchy red. His wattle and the crinkled bags beneath his eyes tightened. Okay, so disarming levity was out.

"You don't play this straight with me," the deputy said, "and maybe I'll have you spending the night in a cell with some boys that won't make much of a distinction between you *or* a Samantha. Do you want that?"

"No sir."

The deputy nodded, liked that word *sir*; it dialed his color down a hue. When he took a heavy breath and sighed, Jamey felt a tingle in his nose, eighty-six proof. The bottom dropped out of his stomach. This was officially bad now. Whoever had claimed that vodka had no smell must have had nerve damage.

The deputy worked his tongue around the pouch of his cheek and scratched at the bulge. "Who's this Samantha Emerson, and why should she let you have her nice riceburner car?"

"She's my fiancée," Jamey explained. "She flew to Flagstaff a few days ago. Her family, that's where they live. Where she's from. That's where I'm headed now. We're getting married on Saturday. Everybody going up to the Grand Canyon. That's where we're getting married."

The deputy was squinting at him with those gunsight eyes, sniffing at him for a lie. Jamey figuring he must fit a profile, a description, or some other echo lodged in this alleged peace officer's memory.

"Married," the deputy said, and expelled a snort of disgust. "Now why would you want to go and do a shit-for-brains thing like that?"

Jamey let the question roll off him with a shrug; let the man read whatever he wanted to in the silence.

"How's her ass? She got herself a nice ass?"

Jamey had to let this sink in, then found himself nodding. Play along, let the guy have his fun. Two minutes and he'd never see this buffoon again.

"Better take yourself a picture of it one of these days, 'cause before you know it you're gonna wake up some morning and it's gonna look like she's got a twenty-pound bag of wet cornmeal back there."

Then he asked about her breasts.

Nodding some more — it was all Jamey could do, feeling himself losing inches by the moment. A kid all over again, the schoolboy with a crooked foot, forced to sit on the sidelines and watch. And those were the good days. On the bad days, he had to stand before those he couldn't fight, from whom he couldn't run, and swallow their crap until they grew bored with dishing it out.

He looked at the wedding band on the deputy's finger, wondering how dead white the skin beneath it was.

The man gave the license one last scowl before returning it along with Sam's registration. He shuffled a few steps away, still eyeing him. Jamey decided to wait him out, for as sure as he asked if they were through, some new grievance would be held against him. The deputy made a feint in the direction of his cruiser, then spun around again — fell for it, didn't you, sucker?

"Duncan MacGregor?" he said.

Jamey nearly laughed, relieved, because now it was all so clear.

"So that's what this is —"

He realized, too late, that the recognition on his face had come across in the worst possible manner, everything the deputy had been hoping for. The deputy was a blur now, all tan shirt and sunburned red. For a man who'd drunk his lunch, he moved faster than Jamey would have thought possible.

He vise-gripped Jamey's shoulder and banged the right side of his face into the

roof of Samantha's car. Seeing stars, Jamey heard the whisking of gunmetal against leather. The muzzle jammed into the base of his skull, as big around as a howitzer, the most real thing he'd ever known.

"You don't understand!" Jamey shouted. "Just let me —"

Metal on bone — he not only heard it when the trigger was pulled, he felt it, the snap conducted deep inside his head. His knees buckled, his bladder let go in a gush of humiliation.

"What that was," harsh eighty-six proof whisper behind his ear, "was the empty chamber I used to keep unloaded case some sneaky shit ever got my gun away from me. Never happened, and now I just like how the sound of it makes assholes like you shut your mouth. Now, you listen close to *this*."

The ratcheting of hammer and cylinder — Jamey tensed, terrified they would be the last things he would ever hear.

"That was five more coming up, and every one of 'em'd make a lot noise than your mouth, so don't you run it."

Jamey couldn't stop thinking what if this sadist had been wrong — instead of dry-firing his revolver, he'd dropped the hammer on a loaded chamber. Because he'd taken his gun out earlier and forgotten about it, half-drunk and playing with it for the same reasons hormonal boys play with their cocks ... because it's handy and it feels so good.

What would, a fleeting thought, Duncan MacGregor do now?

Jamey was off-balance even before the deputy's foot hooked his ankle to wrench his legs apart for the frisk. Too sudden, too sloppy, the move yanked his leg back instead of to the side, dropping him flat beside the car. He felt a hand flail at him on the way down, then his forehead glanced off the fender and his chest hit concrete.

He saw it strike the edge of the gas pump island, didn't even realize it had been dropped — the revolver now loose, catching the curb's lip with its hammer. The sound

of the shot slapped off metal and numbed his eardrums. First time in history the man loses his gun and it had to be today.

Above him, the deputy bellowed. A hand on Jamey's neck, another grabbing the waistband of his jeans — he was yanked off the ground, concrete spinning away from him, then the hood of the car hurtling at him as he was slammed down like a sack of potatoes. He crossed his arms before his face, let his elbows dent the sheet metal instead.

Blood on the windshield, a spattered line of Morse code —he *couldn't* have hit that hard, could he?

Jamey risked a peek over his shoulder and saw the deputy, hatless now, reeling away. He staggered into a gas pump, caroming off it to fall against a trashcan filled with wads of blue paper towel. The left side of his chest was stained with a big splotch of blood; another one reddened the right side of his neck. Two wounds and one shot? Jamey tried the math and couldn't make it fit.

He slid off the car's hood and wobbled on shaky knees, then surrendered to every screaming nerve. His foot lashed out and connected. Some orthopedic surgery and that foot's not such a joke anymore, is it — just look at the damage it can do when given a chance. Watch that sunburned nose bend across one cheek. Again. Watch those sneering lips split across nicotine-stained teeth. Again. And again.

Even after his rubbery leg went still, Jamey stood cursing this man who'd ruined his life for nothing. This man who sat slumped and still, staring down into his own lap.

And the roaring in Jamey's ears dissolved into eerie calm.

No. This could *not* have happened. Someone would tap him on the shoulder soon and tell him so, that it was a mistake and was now being retracted. That today was still the best day of his life. That soon he would wake up behind the wheel of his car again and wonder how he'd gotten there, sipping at a bottle of Starbucks coffee and wondering where it came from, because he didn't remember stopping, but he must

have ... ah well, daydreaming again —

Reality again, vicious and noisy: Jamey turned to see a plate glass avalanche sliding from the window frame of the convenience store. And something in the air like bees, ping-pong off a metal motor oil sign. Robbie the gunslinger on the other side of the demolished window with outstretched arms. Another fickle autograph hound — gets what he wants, then turns on his idol. The same way John Lennon went down.

Not this time. Jamey stooped, snatched up the fumbled revolver, and returned fire. He'd rarely held a gun except for bit-part roles, just make-believe, nothing like this, but flexibility is the key to improvisation. Work with what your co-star throws at you. Throw it right back, escalate that synergy. Robbie vanished from the window, playing his part just the way he was supposed to.

Jamey let the gun dangle at his side and stared at it as if it had grown there. Like waking up one morning to find skin lesions, no trace of them the night before. Asking how this could have happened, especially now, with everything to live for.

Movement back at the window: Robbie's arm worming out over the sill. No Robbie, just his arm as he fired blind, the Gulp 'n' Go now his own fortified bunker. Ricochets whining off a support beam for the pump area's overhang.

Jamey knew this much: Duncan MacGregor wouldn't stick around at a time like this. He clambered behind the wheel of the car and gave the key an urgent twist. Had this been a movie he would've veered out of the parking lot just as the pumps erupted, fishtailing on the verge of losing control, the back bumper dripping fire as a cloud of orange flame and greasy smoke boiled into the sky behind him.

But there was none of this — anticlimactic that way — Jamey only hoping for neutral territory down the road, someplace where he could breathe again, get this mess sorted out without all the world's hot-heads jumping to conclusions.

He was no criminal. Really, he wasn't.

He'd only played one on TV.