

## Prologue

### The Untimely Demise of Tulip Prescott

In the winter of 1995, Tulip Prescott trudged along the shoulder of a country road east of Flagstaff, Arizona. She watched the sky darken and felt the January wind pick up a chill. The cold seeped through the soles of her cheap shoes.

She pulled the collar of her worn coat up tight around her neck and shivered, then scanned the horizon behind her for signs of a car that might stop and give her a lift, but she knew that traffic thinned this time of evening. Twenty miles to walk before suppertime.

*Damn, why didn't my uncle pick me up? Mustn't swear.* She tried to make the sign of the cross, but her heavy overcoat stuck in the way. *Please, God, bring me a ride.*

The farm kids she took care of were Mark, Bode, and Sheila. Mark, the oldest was eleven, five years younger than she. There would have been no work for her if their parents hadn't given up on horse ranching and taken jobs in town.

We need a reliable person to watch our kids, the children's mother told her. Are you dependable?

Yes'm, she'd said. She needed the money.

She knew she was pretty in a sixteen-year-old sort of way, but didn't dream of a handsome stranger taking her away from this place. People called her a nice girl and said she looked like

her mother. She didn't mind. She liked to flash a smile and show her good disposition. A nice, big-boned farm boy would do just fine.

Spectral images played on the dark mass of ponderosa pines that bordered the highway, and her heart hammered in sudden fear. The rumble of exhaust from an approaching vehicle made her knees wobble in relief. She turned to walk backwards and headlights swept over her. Before she raised her arm to flag the car down, it pulled off the road onto the gravel. The driver put his arm out the window and waved. Never take a ride from a stranger, her mother had said, but the wind and cold convinced her to move to the automobile.

“Come on, hop in. It's gonna snow. Gonna freeze if you try to walk through dis storm.” The man's voice was rough, and he spoke in heavy Native patois.

“Thanks for stopping.” Tulip opened the door. “Thank you, God,” she added under her breath. It felt toasty-warm inside, and an immediate sting bit into her wind-chilled cheeks. She ran her tongue over her chapped lips. She slammed the door and felt guilty for not being more careful. She had clicked the snow off her boots before she entered, but saw traces on the brand new floor mats.

She glanced at the driver and recoiled. She'd seen him before, but he'd never noticed her, let alone talked to her. He smiled, and she saw cruelty in his face.

“Welcome aboard,” he said with what sounded like fake heartiness. “You headed inta town?”

She nodded, too nervous to answer.

He stomped on the accelerator and the car squealed onto the highway. “You’re a pretty little thing,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Tulip Prescott,” she answered. Damn, she heard how shaky her voice sounded. She stared out the side window.

“Good thing I came along. Gonna snow pretty soon, and no percentage gettin’ caught outside when it blows.”

He put his hand on Tulip’s leg and gave it a squeeze. She jumped and grabbed for the door but couldn’t find the handle. *Damn new cars*. Her heart pounded under her heavy coat. The man looked at her, the ugly smile spreading across his face again.

“A hot one ain’t you?” he said. She heard the catch in his voice. “I need to pick up somethin’. Jes take a minute.” He slowed the car and turned onto a small dirt road.

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He finished his third cigarette and tossed the butt out the crack he'd opened in the driver's side window. He could still feel the heat of anger in his face. *Look what you did to my car with those fucking clodhopper boots.*

That damn kid had kicked the dashboard and broken the trim. He looked over at her in disgust. He saw what she might have looked like at thirty, and then forty—not unattractive, but plain, wide-hipped, and homespun. He reached across her, opened the glove box, and took out a small cellophane envelope and a mirror. He spread the meth out in two small, neat lines and inhaled. That felt better. He reached over and opened the rider's side door, then took his foot and pushed her out into the fresh snow.

“Sleep tight, you slut.” He engaged the gears and backed away, careful not to run over her. The snow would cover his tracks, and they wouldn't find her until spring.

## PART I

The Res

## Chapter 1

### Flagstaff

*On the road again, just can't wait to get on the road again... \**

*\*Words and music by Willie Nelson*

The tune-up on the 1967 Corvette had set me back a few hundred dollars. I'd forgotten how expensive these dudes could be. Worth every penny. I stomped on the accelerator and felt four hundred thirty-five horsepower grab my chest and push me down the empty road. The enhanced air conditioning and sound systems were the major modifications I'd made to the 'Vette. The driver's seat slide rail was lengthened to accommodate my six-five frame; otherwise, it was stock. I loved to take it on road trips, and even though Santa Fe to Flagstaff was a short hop, I couldn't resist.

My wife, Darlene, decided our animals needed attention more than I, so she stayed home. One of our four dogs had cut himself on barbed wire, and the vet's treatment included shaving a large square on his side and sewing it up with five stitches. No way would he wear one of those cages on his head, so somebody needed to monitor him to stop him and his buddies from licking the wound.

*Positively Fourth Street* boomed out of the DVD player. "*I wish for just one time, you could stand inside my shoes...*" I kept my eyes on the road, and thought about the phone call that had prompted this trip.

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“Jack Sloan?”

“Who wants to know?” Tired of solicitors—like the ‘no-call’ system worked.

“My name is Frank Pickel, and I work for a small band of Navahos located a short hop East of Flagstaff. We want to build a casino, and you were suggested as a consultant.”

In an earlier life, I’d run a management company that built Native gambling resorts in Canada. It was a few years since my last gig, but I still knew people in the business.

“Who gave you my name?” I tried to keep the irritation out of my voice.

“Ed Reese. Said he used to be your partner.”

“True enough. Haven’t seen him in a long time. Surprised he didn’t want to take the job,” I said.

The last time I’d spoken to Ed was before I went on the lam a few years ago. We’d built an Indian casino in the Canadian Maritimes and I’d run into a couple of rough characters. I never told him what happened, so he didn’t know about the people I’d killed. Maybe he wouldn’t be so eager to recommend me if he knew.

“Mr. Pickel, I haven’t been near a casino operation for quite a while, and I don’t have any interest in jumping back in. I’m sure you can find a more qualified person.”

“We want you, Mr. Sloan—may I call you Jack? This won’t be an easy proposition. Lots of opposition from other Tribal factions, but the payoff for you and the indigenous people will be excellent. We’re prepared to offer you one hundred thousand dollars the moment you sign a contract with us and a lot more when the project comes home.”

“For a hundred grand, you can call me Jack.” That kind of incentive took the edge off my natural inclination to tell anyone who stuck their nose in my business to fuck off. “Tell you what I’m willing to do. I’ll take a look at your contract and have my attorney review it. Can you send me a copy?”

“I’ll courier it today. Thank you for listening, Jack.”

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What the hell. Life was too easy lately. Darlene and I spent most of our time holed up on the rancho with the horses and dogs. My current partner and closest friend, Tommy Crowfoot managed Sheila’s, the bar he and I co-owned in Santa Fe. I took my Gibson and sat in with the band once in a while, but times change, and we all get older. The things that drove me when I’d first bought the place, including a craving for excitement, were now satisfied by riding my mare

and chasing through the barrancas with my main dogs. A funny thing—aging. I still felt a fire in my gut, but at a couple of years past fifty, I wasn't as agile and strong as I used to be. Sure, I watched what I ate and worked out every day, but a few things can't be changed, and the erosions of time fell into that category.

When I'd come to Santa Fe to live, I'd looked for a house with a swimming pool, my big physical passion besides women. I still can't believe how lucky I'd been to find the home where Darlene and I live, or how lucky I'd been to find her. After eight years together, we still shared the same views about life, and now, in the summer of 2010, the future looked like something I wanted to be part of.

The contract arrived as promised and I took it to Zeke Martinez, long-time friend and attorney. He said it looked fine. Plenty of escape clauses, and non-refundable upfront money. He knew I didn't want to dive into a strange situation, and then discover snakes at the bottom of the pit, unless I could see a way out.

I called Frank Pickel and told him I'd meet him in Flagstaff in three days. He pushed for sooner, but there were things to take care of. I should have asked Zeke to check out Frank Pickel along with the contract.

Why did I fail to do what would be normal in the course of any business deal? I've since thought about it and concluded that I was afraid Zeke would find a negative, and I'd miss the opportunity to get back in the game. Hindsight is perfect.

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The highway unfolded in front of me. I-25 to Albuquerque, and I-40 to the reservation, a few miles short of Flagstaff, Arizona. About 350 miles or five hours driving. The too-familiar first leg of the journey passed in a flash. I'd driven to the Albuquerque airport so many times I could do it in my sleep. I headed west through Grants and toward Gallup. If you could forget you were on an interstate, the terrain looked unchanged from how it must have been in the days of Kit Carson and Billy the Kid. The high desert owns a beauty different from that of the Rockies or mountains like the Blue Ridge or Ozarks. Deep cut arroyos, towering, painted buttes and mesas, and a wildness that makes a person yearn to strap on a six-shooter, saddle a horse, and ride toward the horizon—at least that's what it does for me.

At the Gallup exit, a sign that read "Yah-tah-hey" caught my attention. I needed to eat, and decided to drive into town and find a place. I wondered about the name I'd seen on the highway, but another marker told me it was a few miles north, and I didn't want to take the time. A red-lit neon off Main Street advertised food and drink, so I pulled into the empty parking spot a few doors down.

Maybe I'd stop and spend the night in Gallup. My wristwatch read quarter past four, and I wasn't due at the reservation until the next morning. On the other hand, I'd covered more than half the distance and had plenty of daylight remaining. I could always find a motel in Winslow or drive the few extra miles into Flagstaff. I'd decide after a burger and beer.

For the past ten years, I never went anywhere unarmed—illegally, for seven of those years, and within the law the past three. New Mexico issues carry permits, and when I was sure my name no longer appeared in any law enforcement data bases, I'd taken the required courses and applied. My weapon of choice remained the Glock 21, a .45 caliber show-stopper, but when I traveled, I kept the .45 in the glove box and wore a Glock 33, "Pocket Rocket", strapped to my ankle. The .357 hollow points could wreak havoc at short range, and I liked the eleven round capacity.

Why did I feel the need? After my last stint in the casino business, a death-dealing crew had hunted me for three years, seeking revenge for what I'd done to their main man, a thief and a killer. I shut them down, but the past clawed its way back into my consciousness a couple of years later when the FBI used what it knew about me to force my hand and help them solve a kidnapping case that crossed the border between New and Old Mexico. No wonder I felt compelled to carry a gun.

The bar was almost deserted at this time of day. I slid onto a stool and checked out the ancient scratched oak. A man who reminded me of the guy in the Bates Motel came from behind a plastic curtain toward the rear and walked toward me.

"Kitchen open?" I already regretted choosing this spot, but I didn't want to offend the bartender by walking out.

“Burgers—and we have soup left over from lunch. Pretty good.” He wiped his hands on the apron slung around his skinny midsection.

“Bring me a burger, please. No chili. Mustard and pickles. And a Tecate.” I didn’t trust the mayo in a place like this.

He laid down a paper place mat and put a cold, sweating beer on it, then shambled toward the curtain.

I followed him with my eyes. That’s when I noticed two yahoos playing pool in the back of the place. Something odd about their game. The big guy holding a cue stroked a shot that didn’t come close. No way it could have, given that he’d locked me in a frozen gaze. *What the fuck?* I sipped on my Tecate and stared at the mirror behind the bar. The proprietor returned a few minutes later carrying a plate bearing my burger and potato chips.

“What do I owe you?” I wanted to settle up in case I needed to make a quick exit.

“Eleven bucks, plus tax.”

I laid fifteen on the counter.

“Keep the change.”

I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. The pool players were edging my way. Both still carried their cue sticks. This was insane. I didn't know anybody from Gallup, and nobody knew I was here. I held the burger in my left hand and took a bite—not too bad. My right hand snaked down my boot and tripped the release mechanism on the Pocket Rocket. It jumped into my fist, and I laid it on the bar beside my plate. No sense in being coy.

“We don't want no trouble here, mister.” The bartender held up his hands.

“Then what's with those boys?” I inclined my head toward the duo who stood stock-still about ten feet away.

“Christ, mister. They want a pool game. Fancy themselves hustlers.” He managed a weak smile.

“They don't mean no harm.”

I felt the breath go out of my chest and my arms relax. *Maybe Darlene is right and I am insane.* I picked up the pistol and shoved it back in my boot.

“Sorry about that. I'm a little jumpy.”

“So, how about it mister? You want a game?” The taller of the two had moved closer.

“It's tempting, partner, but I'm in kind of a hurry. You boys take care.”

I wrapped the rest of my burger in a napkin, backed off the bar stool and bid them adios. Next time, I'd try a McDonald's drive-thru.

## Chapter 2

### Chief Bear

I tooled on to Flagstaff that evening and found a respectable-looking motel a little outside of town. Next morning I rose, ate a light breakfast, and headed toward my appointment.

Places where the U.S. government has parked Indian Tribes announce themselves with a small sign: “You are now entering the so-and-so Reservation, or Pueblo, or whatever”. The landscape glares progressively bleaker, the homes more dilapidated, and the looks you get from pedestrians more disinterested —unless the tribe has hit a gold vein with a casino. In my earlier career I’d visited upwards of fifty reserves from Maine to the State of Washington, and they all felt the same. A few were more verdant and scenic, but many sat on piles of rock and dirt. It’s a great national disgrace that nobody wants to talk about.

One of the reasons I’d left the casino business was because I didn’t feel confident that the end justified the means. Tribes who were successful with gambling approached their newfound riches in various ways: many built infrastructure, others did individual disbursements, and still others made poor investments and wasted their money. The one constant became white America’s antipathy. It was like the collective guilt over outrages like Wounded Knee were cleansed and replaced by jealousy. I thought the Tribes deserved whatever they could earn, and, since whites comprised most of the clientele and many of the investors, it seemed logical they would cheer success. Not so. The opposite occurred. The prevalent attitude appeared to be that

the richer Tribes were fleecing us out of money with their casinos, and the poorer ones didn't deserve special government consideration.

I crossed over into Indian Country, and it hit me that in less than half an hour, I would be sitting down with a Tribal Chief and maybe falling into the same abyss as before. It did not cheer me.

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I asked the first person I saw on the road for directions to the meeting hall where Frank Pickel had told me to go.

“Two streets up—maybe a mile—then turn left. Can't miss it. What chew want there?” The old-timer's quizzical eyes gleamed under rough brows. He wore faded, threadbare jeans and a blue, dirty work shirt. Plenty of miles on his scuffed boots.

I ignored him and rolled up the window. The midday sun had started to sear everything within range, and the side of the car burned hot when I touched it. The old man waved both hands to signal me that he wanted more talk. I re-opened the window.

“Since your goin' that way, how 'bout a ride? Ain't very polite jes to drive off.”

He was right, of course, and I motioned him to the passenger side.

“We heard you was comin’ to talk to the Chief about them fuckin’ casinos.”

“You don’t like casinos? And who is ‘we’?”

“Huh? I don’t care about them,” he said, ignoring my second question.

“Then why are they ‘fucking casinos’?”

“Are you nuts, or sumthin? You know how people talk. It’s fuckin’ this and fuckin’ that. Like a speech figure.”

I rolled down my window about an inch in hopes of ventilating his body odor to the great outdoors. All it did was let heat into the car and increase the stench.

“What chew gonna do here? What chew gonna talk about?” He gave me a suspicious look.

“Well, you know how it’s fuckin’ this and fuckin’ that?”

He nodded and smiled.

“It’s none of your fuckin’ business old-timer.” I pulled the car to the side of the road and motioned for him to get out.

“Screw you, you honky bastard.” He slammed the door.

I pulled away fast in case he decided to give the ‘Vette a shoe in the side. Wow, I’d forgotten a lot about the culture. Plenty of resentment and tons of suspicion. Maybe I didn’t want to get involved.

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I pulled into the parking lot next to the Tribal offices. What appeared to be the main building offered the most promise, and the sign on the door said, ‘enter’—nothing about ‘at your own risk’.

I told the tired-looking receptionist I had an appointment, and she waved me through the inner door. I found The Chief sitting in an open area of the first floor marked off by chairs and other furniture. The fellow who sat next to him rose when I came in and walked toward me.

“You must be Jack Sloan.” He motioned to the file on the table. “I’m Frank Pickel, and this is Chief Bear.” He shook my hand.

Pickel was an odd combination. Physically repellant, his voice held a hint of culture and education. I marked him as a person to be wary of. The Chief, on the other hand, came on as my new best friend. I felt like he was running for office, and I was a swing voter.

“Happy to meet you, Jack. Call me Bear, everyone else does. How was the drive? Need anything to wet your whistle?”

He pumped my arm until I felt the pressure ease and was able to back off.

“Coca-cola?” He pulled one of the old time six-ounce bottles from the refrigerator next to his desk and held it out to me. Condensation dripped from the glass.

“Thanks.” I’d always liked the little cokes. The flavor in the twelve-ounce bottles was different. Maybe all in my mind.

“Let’s talk casinos.” Bear gave a wide smile and motioned for me to sit. “You know about us?”

“I read what I could find on the Internet,” I said. “You’re a splinter group off the main reservation. On private land. Correct?”

“Yeah, but that don’t mean we’re not a tribe. Here’s the story.”

He spent the next half-hour filling me in on the history of his land and aspirations. I’d remember every detail of the conversation later, although I’d prefer to forget it. I’ve been around enough to see trouble coming, but I’ve always been a sucker for a good story, and Bear proved to be a master fabulist.

While Bear talked, I took in the scenery. My picture was clipped to the top of the file on the table, and I tried to get an unobtrusive look, but Pickel moved his hand and slid it toward him. Something he didn't want me to see, but what?