

CHAPTER ONE—CLOUDS IN MY COFFEE

Angel

Imagine the jolt I felt when I opened my good friend Sonny's new book of poems, *Dancing in the Dark*, and saw that a good chunk of his poems were based on my stories. I had no idea he was taking mental notes as we shared stories over a few bottles of beer. The words, of course, were Sonny's, and in all honesty, I could not have transformed the essence of those stories into metaphor like Sonny had, not being a poet or the celebrated New Mexico native son that he was, but a journalist and fiction writer.

In the growing dusk of the summer evening as we sat on my back porch and watched the Manzano Mountains change colors as the sun set, he had tipped his bottle at me, "How do you find these stories you cover?"

"I have my sources," I answered with a shrug, which wasn't meant to be evasive but was the easiest way to explain the network of people who send stories my way. Occasionally, the stories came out of nowhere, but mainly the way it worked was that a person I had interviewed earlier would call to tip me off to another. "Stories beget stories. You've got to earn your way to get them," I bragged. My lips, loosened by *cerveza*, by his questions, got me going those evenings. I was talking aloud to hear myself, to process my notes and observations, to hear again what was said and left unsaid, spinning the story for myself. Later, I'd sit at the computer and punch out the lead, which by then slipped out effortlessly.

Sonny had taken the seeds of my stories and planted them in the fertile soil of his imagination where songs and prayers, rain and *sol* nurtured them. They came forth beautiful, like thick rows of corn standing shoulder to shoulder, swaying in the wind. And because Sonny could be a *vato loco* even without the use of drugs, his poems came alive and danced on the page in wild, naked abandon. I heard him singing, and crying, too, his voice strong and vibrant. *Damn, he's good*, I thought, feeling a little proud that he was my friend and these were my stories...or at least a close relative to my stories, maybe like second-cousins-once-removed. Then just as quickly, the thrill at his work dampened, and I felt inadequate and depressed at my own writing stalemate. And yes, ticked off that Sonny hadn't told me what he was up to, being the coyote that he is.

Sonny identified as Hispano-Indio, which was now finally acceptable to claim. In the dark days of New Mexico history, being a *mestizo*, a *coyote*, was something to be ashamed of. Coyotes in the past,

especially the light-skinned blondies, were forced to shove their Indian-ness into the mop closet with the rags and buckets, where family members couldn't talk about it, much less admit it—until now. Sonny had come bursting out of his proverbial closet of shame the way Superman ran out of the phone booth, having switched from his secret identity as meek and mild Clark Kent to become Who He Really Was, the flying wonder of superhuman strength and x-ray vision, whose only weakness was Kryptonite from his home planet. That was the kind of wry observation I usually made about people that I was now reading, feeling somewhat horrified and uneasy to see my words come back. But hey, what were the chances that the people I interviewed would read Sonny's book and recognize themselves as metaphor incarnate?