

CHOKER POINT
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CHAPTER ONE

Three days before the first murder, Sal Garcia said, "You want to go to a riot?"

We were in U-Needa-Bebida, downtown. It was a late Friday afternoon in Tucson's early spring. A few drinkers hung around in the dim barroom, supposedly waiting for rush hour traffic to thin out. We sat back in worn brown leather chairs at the bar where our fathers had bought each other beers on afternoons like this. I had a Negra Modelo and Sal had a Coors. Norah Jones and Lalo Guerrero took turns on the CD changer.

"What riot?" I asked.

"The riot we're having on Monday night," Sal said. "After the game."

"The truth comes out," I said. "You guys plan these things in advance to spike the ratings."

Sal shoots video for a Tucson newscast. He's in his mid-forties and thinks of himself as a geezer in a kids' game. Sometimes he really does seem to know the news before it happens.

"No planning required, Brinker," he said. "We got to the Final Four in '97 and won, and there was a riot. We played in '01 and lost, and there was a riot. We're a cinch to make the championship game on Monday night, so guess what? Win or lose, the Old Pueblo's rumbling."

Sal said "we" the way everyone in Tucson talks about University of Arizona teams.

"Not this year," I told him. "The cops say they've learned from their mistakes."

"Yeah, right," Sal said.

"They're turning out in force. They canceled all their vacations and days off."

"Sure."

"Everything will be under control this time. I saw that on your news, in fact."

Sal laughed and said, "You *believe* our news?"

So on that Monday night in early April, Sal and I climbed the creaky wooden stairs of the former movie theater on Fourth Avenue. He had been right. Arizona won Saturday's game, knocking off a tenth seed that somehow lucked into the Final Four. The UA would play Duke for the championship.

At the top of the stairs, we stepped outside onto the roof. Sal carried his video camera and tripod and a small television monitor. I lugged his big aluminum case, padded inside, filled with heavy gear and extra tapes. *That's* why he asked me along, I thought. Or maybe he just wanted to hear something about Dolores.

At 8:30, the night was cool and full dark except for street lights and a kaleidoscopic neon glow from the avenue's bar windows. The police helicopter made slow, noisy passes above. A slim slice of moon sprinkled faint light onto the side streets and alleys. It wasn't much, though. All I could see in the residential section were shadowy figures moving about. Some emerged to the relative brightness of the avenue. Others vanished into yards or doorways or simply walked into the darker distance.

Two floors down and to our right, the student saloon district bustled. It was a basic college business block. By day, you found funky clothing shops, a feminist bookstore, cheap eats. At night, the bars ruled. This evening, kids partied from one to another. They showed ID to the bouncers and hurried inside. Sounds of laughter and whiffs of marijuana drifted up to the rooftop. Every so often, I heard a cheer when Arizona hit a basket or a groan when Duke scored. It seemed almost innocent. A festive game night in a college town.

Almost.

The police command post, a huge, martial RV in black and white, hunkered down on our left. Two-hundred officers, I guessed, massed around it. They were putting on their helmets and bulletproof vests, and testing the heft of clear, hard plastic shields that would protect them from head to thigh. Several cops walked a few steps forward and a few steps back, then did it again, rehearsing some weird urban disorder suppression dance known only to them. A few thwacked their riot clubs into leather-gloved hands.

Sal held out his arms to indicate our supposedly safe rooftop.

"The value of seniority," he said. He walked to the edge and tossed two cables down to a news van parked at the curb. "Rick Keene and Benny Quijano, the new guys, they're on the street. Right in the middle of it when the head busting starts."

At the command post, a tall cop with sergeant's stripes was getting the troops lined up. They stood in close ranks, about twenty to a row across the avenue, two blocks north of the bars.

"First thing to watch for," Sal said, "is when some girl sits on a guy's shoulders, big crowd around yelling at her, and she pulls up her shirt to show her tits. That's when you know the mob is well lubricated and ready to rock. I like to get that shot."

"Sure, I'll watch for that," I said.

"Knew I could count on you," Sal said.

"Can you actually use that video?" I asked him, laughing.

"Not on the air," he said, "but we'll put it in the gag reel for the station Christmas party."

Sal stood close to the edge of the roof and surveyed the scene below.

"Everybody knows what's going to happen tonight except those poor devils," he said, pointing to the police. "They think they have a plan. Yeah, right."

He stood aside from the camera. "Look through here," he said.

I bent to peer through his viewfinder. The night exposure gave everything a pixilated, dark orange hue. Street lights, the brightest images, bloomed in the lens like tracer fire.

"It looks like some third world uprising on CNN," I said.

"Live, from the roof of the Tegucigalpa Hilton."

"The students over here, and the junta over there," Sal said. "Great TV, guaranteed."

"And the press in the middle." I pointed to a cluster of reporters standing on the sidewalk outside O'Rourke's, one of the biggest bars. I recognized two newspaper writers and three attractive youngsters from the television stations.

The men seemed to be helping a woman I had not seen in town before. She was young and slender, like the television people, but dressed down like the newspaper types. Her back was turned to me. I couldn't see her face. Her short blond hair shone in the street lamps' glow.

The other reporters pointed to spots along the street. They gestured to indicate how the police might move toward the bars. The woman scribbled in one of those familiar notebooks that reporters use, skinny enough to shove in a pocket. When she turned, I could see that she kept brushing a bit of hair over her right ear.

"Who's that?" I asked Sal. He was watching her, too.

"April Lennox," he said. "SNC. Southwest News Consortium from Los Angeles. They write for a bunch of alt-weeklies."

"She came all the way from L.A. to see some drunks go nuts after a basketball game?"

Sal laughed and pointed to the cops. "Good old police brutality is in the air, amigo. SNC, that's their kind of headline."

"You know her?"

"She was at the news conference down at headquarters yesterday. The one where the chief said everything will be fine tonight. All us guys introduced ourselves to her."

"A little young for you, Sal?"

"The hope lives on, the dream shall never die," he said.

"How's Dolores?"

"Still in New York," I told him. He knew enough to let it go.

Sal's two-way radio crackled. He put in an ear piece, fiddled with a button and said, "Go." After a moment, "Okay."

He bent to his camera and panned from the cops to the bars and back. "Like this?" he said, then panned twice more. "Okay, good."

He turned to me. "That was the control truck. Sometimes in these night shoots, it's hard to see when we pan. You lose the image if you go too fast."

I nodded as if I knew what he was talking about.

"Five minutes to play," I said, looking at the game on the little TV. "If something's going to pop, it'll be soon."

Down below, almost everyone had decided where to be for the big finish. The fun seekers were on the avenue or in the bars. Neighbors along the side streets got away from the crowd, into their homes, in front of their televisions. Only one man, a short, thin fellow in jeans and a white tee shirt, stood in the dim light of an alley. He looked around nervously, perhaps uncertain about venturing into the crowd. I didn't think anything more about him. The action would be on the avenue.

With 4:23 remaining, score tied, Arizona's star guard, DeShawn Nzuma, took a charge, but got called for a blocking foul. It was his fifth, knocking him out of the game. From the tinny TV speaker, I heard Billy Packer shout, "Oh, terrible call!"

Angry roars burst from the bars. Someone threw a beer bottle. It shattered on the sidewalk. Kids poured into the street. At the command post, the sergeant pointed a bullhorn at his cops. I couldn't hear over the noise of the swelling crowd, but the cops stood a little taller, tightened their ranks, and raised the plastic shields.

In a few places, for a few moments, it looked like the goofy college drunk that Sal predicted. Two young women pulled up their T-shirts as the crowds cheered.

But then five muscular guys, stripped to the waist, jumped on an old Volvo sedan parked around the corner from Boracho's Bar. Another kid ran up with a baseball bat and smashed the car's windows. The gang rolled the car onto its roof and danced on the exposed undercarriage.

"Now that's entertainment!" Sal said, his eye to the viewfinder, his tape rolling. "Brink, watch for fires or kids trashing the shops. This isn't gonna stop. We'll be on live real quick here."

As if waiting for the photographer's cue, two young men picked up a big wood-framed sign from the sidewalk in front of a clothing store. They lifted the sign over their heads and heaved it through the store's big window. The plate glass shattered. The men pumped their fists. Then they looked down the street, saw another sidewalk sign, and raced toward it.

A crowd assaulted an ancient Ford pickup truck that was parked by the hot dog stand. They rolled it over and laughed as someone threw a flaming newspaper into the passenger compartment. The old upholstery caught fire as quickly as desert brush in a dry summer. The crowd cheered.

Now they had the cops' attention. The police trotted one block south, closer to the trouble, and reformed their tight ranks. The sergeant with the bullhorn stood in front of the officers' formation, facing the crowd.

"Attention!" he said. "This is the Tucson Police Department. This gathering is an unlawful assembly. This is an official police order to disperse. In the name of the people of the state of Arizona, I order you to leave this area immediately. Listen to

me!" The crowd jeered, hundreds of voices mocking the cops.

The sergeant repeated his order. A few of the throng drifted away to parking lots or side streets. Two-hundred young people faced two-hundred cops, with only one long block of Fourth Avenue between them.

Turning back to the officers, the sergeant barked a command. In unison, the cops raised their clubs and tapped the sides of the big plastic shields. They slow-marched down the avenue, tapping with each step in an eerie tattoo that echoed off the storefronts.

I looked at Sal's TV monitor. The game clock clicked down to zero. Arizona lost by three. The network showed the Dukies celebrating and the Wildcats slumping at their bench. Sal's station immediately cut away from the network to local coverage from the avenue.

Saloon patrons, watching the news, saw what was happening outside. They abandoned their drinks and their bar bills and spilled into the street. By then, I knew, the cops were within range for their "less lethal weapons," tear gas and beanbags filled with tiny plastic balls like big B-B's.

"A reporter got killed in L.A. in the sixties by a tear gas grenade," Sal said, never looking away from scene. "The guy was sitting in some bar, trying to stay out of trouble, and the cops shot a grenade through the window. Hit the guy right on the noggin. Keep your head down when they march by here, Brinker."

Even now, like Sal, I could see how it would unfold. The hooligans and vandals had done their damage and taken off. The guys who rolled the cars and trashed the stores were long gone. They probably weren't even college students, but just punks who used the game as an excuse to smash something. I had watched them run to the end of the street and vanish into the grimy neighborhood near the railroad tracks. The police were pouring all their force and firepower into a showdown with blotto college kids, innocent shop owners and bar bouncers, and the idiot Lookie Lou's who always showed up to gawk at trouble.

Shots sounded as the marching cops covered the first block. Not the crack of gunshots, but the thump of tear gas grenades and beanbags being fired. I barely heard them over the shouts of the crowd and the noisy march of the police. You could have

fired a cannon in the nearby residential streets and nobody on the avenue would have noticed.

A couple of drunks walked toward the advancing cops, arms held out. One of them took a beanbag in the belly and went down, hollering in pain. His friend turned and ran.

That threatening drumbeat, clubs on plastic shields, droned on as the line of uniforms pushed steadily down the avenue.

The first hit of tear gas terrified the crowd. People on the edges of the cloud bolted to side streets and alleys. The unfortunate group stuck in the middle waited until the gas lifted a bit. The police fired more beanbags even before the cluster of targets was visible.

The small man in the white tee shirt finally realized what was happening on the avenue. He turned and walked quickly away, into the neighborhood. I saw him look over his shoulder just before he left the light and stepped into the shadows.

Sal Garcia kept pulling back from his viewfinder to eyeball the wider scene. He would spot some action, twist his camera on its tripod, and zoom in.

Two cops had cornered a man who failed to move out of a doorway. They whacked him with their clubs and left him there. Another man, halfway down the block, was writhing and holding his left thigh. I couldn't tell if these were good guys or bad.

Officers had cuffed three young men. I watched the police drag the shirtless men back toward the command post. Blood dripped from the forehead of one arrestee. Another shouted obscenities loud enough for us to hear on the rooftop.

Then, as if some unseen sound technician's hand had slowly turned down the volume, the din below diminished. The cops broke off their marching drumbeat. People stopped screaming as the avenue cleared. Wisps of teargas drifted in the chill night air. I heard bits of sobbing from the street, the faint crackle of police radios, a siren far away.

A car engine started. The sound jarred me. That's how quiet the avenue had become. A block-and-a-half away, headlights came on. I watched a white Jeep Cherokee swing into the street, then stop suddenly. In the beam of the vehicle's headlights, someone lay sprawled across the center line on the pavement. It was a slender figure, a man, I thought, wearing blue jeans and a white tee shirt stained red.

A woman jumped from the driver's side and ran to the injured man. She had not hit him. He lay in the path of her vehicle as she was about to pull out of her driveway. The woman carried a cell phone. I could see her punch at it three times as she knelt at his side. Nine-one-one, I guessed, and help would be on the way. But the victim's stillness, lying there in the glare of the good Samaritan's headlights, told me that help would be too late.