Seeing Both Sides Is a Bitch

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

By the time Gideon Vale turned sixty-five, he had learned that most people did not want truth. They wanted a side. Truth was too wide, too jagged, too likely to make a person look at themselves in bad lighting. A side came with company. A side came with applause. A side came with enemies you didn’t have to know and allies you didn’t have to question.

Truth came with insomnia.

He sat at the small iron table outside Veda Bloom’s café on the east side of Austin, the early evening still hot enough to feel personal, his coffee gone lukewarm in the thick white mug. The sky had that bruised, stretched-out Texas look, pale fire sinking into a layer of purple haze. Traffic growled somewhere beyond the oaks. A siren rose and disappeared. Two women at the next table were talking about school board politics with the same tone people once used for weather or football. Everything had become a battlefield. Even reading lists. Even pronouns. Even libraries. Especially libraries.

Across from him, Lenora Wren stabbed the air with an unlit cigarette she had promised everyone she no longer smoked.

“You do this to yourself,” she said.

Reading sample — continued

Gideon smiled without liking it. “Do what?”

“Stand in the middle of a hurricane and then act surprised when debris hits you.”

“I’m not standing in the middle. I’m standing outside it.”

“That’s your fantasy.” She leaned back, silver bracelets sliding down her wrist. “You are absolutely in it. You just refuse to wear the team jersey.”

He looked down at the table, at the ring left by his mug. “Because the teams are full of shit.”

Lenora gave him that look that was not pity and not agreement but some old hybrid of both. They had known each other long enough to skip performance.

“Yes,” she said. “But you keep acting as if announcing that in public will save you. It won’t. It just makes both sides hate you faster.”

He laughed once, sharp through the nose. “Good. Maybe efficiency is all we have left.”

She didn’t laugh.

That was the problem lately. He could say something bitter and smart and true enough to count, and nobody laughed because everybody was too tired. Or too scared. Or too eager for blood. Humor required a little oxygen. The public air had thinned.