The Bench Between Sounds

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

The city had learned to shout.

It shouted from buses coughing black breath into morning traffic, from delivery trucks reversing into alleys, from car horns pressed too long by hands that had forgotten the difference between warning and anger. It shouted from open apartment windows where televisions argued with one another across the street. It shouted from construction sites and crosswalk signals, from campaign vans and food trucks, from courthouse steps where people held signs above their heads as if cardboard could keep the world from falling.

Mostly, it shouted from screens.

Screens in hands. Screens in windows. Screens mounted above checkout counters and subway platforms and elevator doors. Screens whispering, flashing, selling, accusing, grieving, mocking, singing, exposing. Screens showing wars between strangers, apologies from celebrities, recipes for longevity, children dancing, fathers weeping, dogs dressed as presidents, women screaming into microphones, men explaining what everyone else refused to understand.

The city shouted because everyone in it had been given a mouth.

And everyone, it seemed, had finally decided to use it.

Reading sample — continued

Mara crossed the square every morning at 7:40, just as the first wave of office workers poured from the train station and the second wave of night-shift workers disappeared into buses headed away from downtown. She walked with the same canvas bag over her left shoulder, the same gray coat folded at the cuffs, the same paper cup of tea held between both hands as if she were warming not her fingers but something deeper.

She was not old, though some people thought of her that way because she moved without urgency. She was fifty-eight, with silver beginning to thread through the black hair she wore pinned at the back of her neck. Her face had the composed look of someone who had survived embarrassment, grief, and public opinion, and had found all three temporary. Her eyes were dark and direct, but not sharp. People sometimes told her she had a calm face. They meant it kindly. They did not know calm had cost her more than anger ever had.

At the center of the square stood a young oak tree supported by two wooden stakes. Beneath it sat a bench made of pale wood that had darkened under rain and heat. The bench faced the fountain, though the fountain had not worked properly in years. Some days it sent up three brave streams of water. Some days it only gurgled. Some days it sat dry and full of coins, cigarette butts, and paper boats folded by children with nowhere else to sail them.