

THE LAST SOUND

A Novel

Book Two of Nine Stories

PART ONE

The Man Who Remembered

Calgary, Alberta — 1956 to 2030

Chapter One: Born on the Mountain

201cThe first sound a man hears shapes everything that comes after.201d

Ezekiel Jebadiah Wilde arrived on this earth the same year the building at 130 Beaver Street was built in Calgary, Alberta. Neither event made the news. Both would matter enormously.

He was born on a Tuesday in late October, on a mountain farm that sat above the treeline like something that had refused to come down. His mother, Vera Wilde, delivered him in the farmhouse with a midwife and a dog named Colonel who howled the whole time. His father, Hank, was in the barn trying to get the radio working. This detail would later feel prophetic.

The farm had been in the Wilde family for two generations. It sat on a shelf of rock and soil overlooking a valley that turned amber in the fall and bone-white in the winter. There were horses, chickens, a temperamental goat called Margaret, and a barn full of rusted equipment that Hank was always about to fix. The nearest town was forty minutes down a gravel road that became impassable in March.

Zeke was the youngest of three, the runt, the odd one. His brother Dale fixed engines. His sister Carol won spelling bees. Zeke, from the age of four, banged on pots.

"He's not drumming," Vera told Hank once, watching their youngest beat a cast-iron lid against the kitchen floor with absolute concentration. "He's listening to himself."

Hank squinted. "He's giving me a headache is what he's doing."

But Vera was right. Even then, Zeke wasn't making noise for the sake of it. He was learning something. He hit the lid differently every time, tuning in to the change in tone, the way a harder strike rang longer, the way a softer one went thump instead of clang. He was four years old and already obsessed with the physics of sound.

By six he had found his father's old guitar in the back of a closet. It was missing two strings and smelled like a basement. He didn't care. He sat with it on the porch for the entire summer, plucking whatever strings remained, figuring out which combinations didn't sound horrible. By fall he was playing simple melodies. By the following spring, Vera had enrolled him in lessons in town.

His teacher, a retired schoolteacher named Mr. Fenwick who smelled permanently of menthol and pipe tobacco, declared after the third lesson that Zeke had "a natural ear and an unnatural stubbornness." Both were accurate. Zeke didn't want to learn scales. He wanted to play songs. Fenwick made him learn scales anyway, and Zeke hated him for it, and then at age twelve played a blues progression so fluently that Fenwick sat back in his chair and said, "Alright then. You know what you're doing." Which was the highest praise Fenwick ever gave anyone.

The mountain shaped Zeke in ways he wouldn't understand until much later. The silence up there was a specific kind of silence — not the absence of sound but the presence of a sound you had to be still to hear. Wind moving through pine. A creek finding its way between rocks. The creak of the farmhouse at 2 a.m. when the temperature dropped. He grew up

understanding that sound existed everywhere, that the world was constantly playing a song, and that most people were too busy to listen.

By sixteen he was playing at the church hall in town on Friday nights, a thing that started as background music for dances and slowly became the reason people came to the dances. By seventeen he had started writing his own songs, which were rough and occasionally embarrassing and absolutely his. By eighteen he had decided.

He was going to be a rock and roll star.

He told his father this at the kitchen table on a January morning. Hank was silent for a long time. Then he said, "You'll need money for bus fare."

It was the most supportive thing Hank Wilde ever said to his youngest son. Zeke treasured it accordingly.